



## RING OF BRIGHT WATER

In this fascinating book Gavin Maxwell tells of the

there But the 'hero' of the book is his pet otter, Mijbil. After his dog had died, he brought this otter cub back from the Tigris marshes. As intelligent and affectionate as any dog, it ran free at the cottage, always returning at night to sleep in the author's bed. The part this charming pet played in Gavin Maxwell's life ended abruptly and tragically. Mijbil, trusting and confiding as always, was killed by a road mender.

Missing his pet desperately, the author determined to seek another tame otter. Every attempt to find one, however, met with frustration until, two years later, an incredible coincidence finally produced Edal, a female successor to Mijbil.

*Ring of Bright Water* evokes all the mystery and beauty of Gavin Maxwell's lonely home and gives a glimpse of the affections and background of an exceedingly accomplished writer.

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# RING OF BRIGHT WATER

GAVIN MAXWELL



UNABRIDGED

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*For John Donald  
and Mary MacLeod of Tormor*

## THE RING

HE HAS DAZZLED ME WITH HIS SUN'S CIRCLE

Too dazzling to see, traced in summer sky

He has crowned me with the wreath of white cloud

That gathers on the snowy summit of the mountain,

Ringed me round with the world-circling wind,

Bound me to the whirlwind's centre

He has married me with the orbit of the moon

And with the boundless circle of the stars

't the orbits that measure years, months, days, and night  
the tides flowing,

Command the winds to travel or be at rest.

At the ring's centre,

Spirit, or angel troubling the still pool,

Causality not in nature,

Finger's touch that summons at a point, a moment

Stars and planets, life and light

Or gathers cloud about an apex of cold,

Transcendent touch of love summons my world to being.

## FOREWORD

IN writing this book about my home I have not given to the house its true name. This is from no desire to create mystery—indeed it will be easy enough for the curious to discover where I live—but because identification in print would seem in some sense a sacrifice, a betrayal of its remoteness and isolation, as if by *doing so I were to bring nearer its enemies of industry and urban life*. Camusfearna, I have called it, the Bay of the Alders, from

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. . .

may perhaps find the likeness of others of which he has himself been fond, for these places are symbols. Symbols, for me and for many, of freedom, whether it be from the prison of over-dense communities and the close confines of human relationships, from the less complex incarceration of office walls and hours, or simply freedom from the prison of adult life and an escape into the forgotten world of childhood, of the individual or the race. For I am convinced that man has suffered in his separation from the soil and from the other living creatures of the world, the evolution of his intellect has outrun his needs as an animal, and as yet he must still, for security, look long at some portion of the earth as it was before he tampered with it.

This book, then, is about my life in a lonely cottage on the north-west coast of Scotland, about animals that have shared it with me, and about others who are my only immediate neighbours in a landscape of rock and sea.

Camusfearna  
October 1959

GAVIN MAXWELL





## ILLUSTRATIONS IN PHOTOGRAVURE

*Between pages 54 and 55*

A bay near Camusfearna

Camusfearna

Jonnie above Camusfearna

The kitchen-living-room of Camusfearna in the early days

Muibh at the top of his tobogganning slide at Camusfearna

A lost marble

*Between pages 102 and 103*

Edal when she first arrived

'She would pass about these pools where Mij had hunted  
before her'

The geese on one of the island beaches

Edal and Jimmy Watt on their morning walk

'She juggled with such small objects . . . as could be satis-  
factorily contained within her small, prehensile grasp'

Edal about her own pursuits in the Camusfearna bay

- *Between pages 150 and 151*

## Concentration

Edal would appear to emulate the Modigliani nude above  
her self-chosen bed

'The bigger dinghy dragged her moorings and stove a plank'  
Edal caught a dab in the scuppers

Lifting a glass net float from the water to play football

'The expression of tightly shut concentration that very small  
babies wear in sleep The photograph repays study the  
wrong way up

PART I

*The Bay of the Alders*



## CHAPTER ONE



chimney-piece are inscribed the words '*Non fatuum huc persecutus ignem*'—'It is no will-o'-the-wisp that I have followed here' Beyond the door is the sea, whose waves break on the beach no more than a stone's throw distant, and encircling, mist-hung

and the waterfall there is utter silence This place has been my home now for ten years and more, and wherever the changes of my life may lead me in the future it will remain my spiritual home until I die, a house to which one returns not with the certainty of welcoming fellow human beings, nor with the expectation of comfort and ease, but to a long familiarity in which every lichen-covered rock and rowan tree show known and reassuring faces

uncompromisingly final. The thought of return had savoured of a jilted lover pleading with an indifferent mistress upon whom

Looking back with distaste to the brashness of my late adolescence I perceive that I was an earnest member of the Celti-

was as controversial as my own. It was not to the company of such as these that I aspired, the healthier and more robust enthusiasm of tartaned hikers from the industrial cities inspired in me a nausea akin to that of Compton Mackenzie's Macdonald of Ben Nevis. It was not that I viewed certain moustaches as long as reverence that the vintage-car cult accords to Bentleys of the 1920s. Nothing in my early life had led me to question the pre-

hundred years, and that it was there and as a Galloway Scot that had been born and brought up. It was a handicap, certainly, as was also my inability to perform Highland dances or to speak Gaelic; to learn would have been to acknowledge that I had not known before, and so would have been unthinkable. I did learn

probably what started the rot, my maternal grandmother had been a daughter of the Duke of Argyll, of MacCallum Mor him-

cure my disease. The melancholy beauty of Strachur and Inveraray was for me still further complicated by the agonies of first love, I was well and truly pixillated, and I soaked myself in the works of Neil Munro and Maurice Walsh when I should have been laying the foundations of a literary education. All this was basically the outcome of an inherently romantic nature tinged with melancholy, for which a special home and uniform had clearly been prepared among the precipitous hills and sea lochs of the West Highlands

There existed during my time at Oxford a curious clique of landed gentry so assertively un urban that we affected a way of dressing quite unsuited to University life, at all times for example, we wore tweed shooting suits and heavy shooting shoes studded with nails and dull with dubbin, and at our heels trotted spaniels or Labrador retrievers. Some of us were Englishmen, but the majority were Scots or those whose parents were in the habit of renting Highland shootings, and I have no doubt that the cult

no longer synonymous

My own yearning for the Highlands was in those days as

grated Englishmen who planted one potato or raised one stone upon another. It is often those who dream of a *grande passion* who find it and suffer and are the sadder for it, and so it was with me, for when at last I came to the West Highlands by right of ownership and of effort they brought me to my knees and sent me away defeated and almost bankrupt. But during that five



years' struggle the false image for which I had yearned had faded, and a truer one, less bedizened with tartan but no whit less beautiful, had taken its place.

Immediately after the war's end I bought the Island of Soay, some four thousand acres of relatively low-lying 'black' land cowering below the bare pinnacles and glacial corries of the

eyes I had earned the right to live among them, and the patent unauthenticity of the Maxwell tartan no longer disturbed me.

When the Soay venture was finished, the island and the boats sold, the factory demolished, and the population evacuated, I went to London and tried to earn my living as a portrait painter. One autumn I was staying with an Oxford contemporary who had bought an estate in the West Highlands, and in an idle moment after breakfast on a Sunday morning he said to me:

'Do you want a foothold on the west coast, now that you've

islands, and an automatic lighthouse. There's been no one there for a long time, and I'd never get any of the estate people to live

a compass.

The road, single-tracked for the past forty miles, and reaching in the high passes a gradient of one in three, runs southwards a mile or so inland of Camusfàrna and some four hundred feet above it. At the point on the road which is directly above the

masses to a dominating peak of more than three thousand feet, snow-covered or snow-dusted for the greater part of the year. On the other side, to the westward, the Isle of Skye towers across a three-mile-wide sound, and farther to the south the stark bastions of Rhum and the couchant lion of Eigg block the sea horizon. The descent to Camusfàrna is so steep that neither the house nor its islands and lighthouse are visible from the road above, and that paradise within a paradise remains, to the casual road-user, unguessed. Beyond Drummfiachlach the road seems, as it were, to become dispirited, as though already conscious of its dead end at sea-level six miles farther on, caught between the terrifying massif of mountain scree overhanging it and the dark gulf of sea loch below.

Drummfiachlach is a tiny oasis in a wilderness of mountain and peat-bog, and it is a full four miles from the nearest roadside dwelling. An oasis, an eyrie, the windows of the house look westward over the Hebrides and over the tyrian sunsets that flare and fade behind their peaks, and when the sun has gone and the stars are bright the many lighthouses of the reefs and islands gleam and wink above the surf. In the westerly gales of winter the walls of Drummfiachlach rock and shudder, and heavy stones are roped to the corrugated iron roof to prevent it blowing away as other roofs here have gone before. The winds rage in from the Atlantic and the hail roars and batters on the windows and the iron roof, all hell let loose, but the house stands and the MacKinnons remain here, as, nearby, the forefathers of them both remained for many generations

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Immediately after the war's end I bought the Island of Soay, some four thousand acres of relatively low-lying 'black' land cowering below the bare pinnacles and glacial corries of the

summer months. I built a factory, bought boats and equipped them with harpoon guns, and became a harpoon gunner myself. For five years I worked in that landscape that before had been, for me, of a nebulous and cobwebby romance, and by the time it was all over and I was beaten I had in some way come to terms with the Highlands—or with myself, for perhaps in my own eyes I had earned the right to live among them, and the patent unauthenticity of the Maxwell tartan no longer disturbed me.

When the Soay venture was finished, the island and the boats sold, the factory demolished, and the population evacuated, I went to London and tried to earn my living as a portrait painter. One autumn I was staying with an Oxford contemporary who had bought an estate in the West Highlands, and in an idle moment after breakfast on a Sunday morning he said to me:

'Do you want a foothold on the west coast, now that you've lost Soay? If you're not too proud to live in a cottage, we've got an empty one, miles from anywhere. It's right on the sea and there's no road to it—Camusfearna, it's called. There's some islands, and an automatic lighthouse. There's been no one there for a long time, and I'd never get any of the estate people to live in it now. If you'll keep it up you're welcome to it.'

a compass.

houlders, I was coming to my new home like one of the hikers whom long ago I had so much despised.

hoot, and by the curious paradox that those who are fondest of animals become, in such an environment, most bloodthirsty at a certain stage of their development, shooting occupied much of my time and thoughts during my school and university years. Many people find an especial attachment for a dog whose companionship has bridged widely different phases in their lives, and so it was with Jonnie, he and his forebears had spanned my

during the shark fishery years he would, unprotesting, arrange himself to form a pillow for my head in the well of an open boat as it tossed and pitched in the waves

beacon through the darkness from Drumnacloch to Camusfearna.

Presently the burn became narrower, and afforded no foothold at its steep banks, then it tilted sharply seaward between rock walls, and below me I could hear the roar of a high waterfall. I climbed out from the ravine and found myself on a bluff of heather and red bracken, looking down upon the sea and upon Camusfearna.

The landscape and seascape that lay spread below me was of such beauty that I had no room for it all at once, my eye flickered from the house to the islands, from the white sands to the flat green pasture round the croft, from the wheeling gulls to the pale satin sea and on to the snow-topped Cuillins of Skye in distance.

Immediately below me the steep hill-side of heather and

and its toreshore formed the whole frontage of the field, running up nearest to me into a bay of rocks and sand. At the edge of this bay, a stone's throw from the sea on one side and the burn on the other, the house of Camusfearna stood unfenced in green grass among grazing black-faced sheep. The field, except immediately opposite to the house, sloped gently upwards from the sea, and was divided from it by a ridge of sand dunes grown over with pale matram grass and tussocky sea-bents. There were rabbits scampering on the short turf round the house, and out over the dunes the bullet heads of two seals were black in the tide.

Beyond the green field and the wide shingly outflow of the burn were the islands, the nearer ones no more than a couple of acres each, rough and rocky, with here and there a few stunted rowan trees and the sun red on patches of dead bracken. The

is not produced by obvious signs of neglect, Camusfearna had few slates missing from the roof and the windows were all intact, but the house wore that secretive expression that is in some way akin to a young girl's face during her first pregnancy.

As I went on down the steep slope two other buildings came into view tucked close under the skirt of the hill, a byre facing Camusfearna across the green turf, and an older, windowless, croft at the very sea's edge, so close to the waves that I wondered how the house had survived. Later, I learned that the last occupants had been driven from it by a great storm which had

brought the sea right into the house, so that they had been forced to make their escape by a window at the back.

At the foot of the hill the burn flowed calmly between an avenue of single alders, though the sound of unseen waterfalls was loud in the rock ravine behind me. I crossed a solid wooden bridge with stone piers, and a moment later I turned the key in Camusfearna door for the first time.



## CHAPTER TWO

THERE was not one stick of furniture in the house, there was no water and no lighting, and the air inside struck chill as a mortuary, but to me it was Xanadu. There was much more space in the house than I had expected. There were two rooms on the ground floor, a parlour and a living-kitchen, besides a little 'back kitchen' or scullery and two rooms and a landing upstairs. The house was entirely lined with varnished pitch pine, in the manner of the turn of the century.

I had brought with me on my back the essentials of living for a day or two while I prospected—a bedding roll, a Primus stove with a little fuel, candles and some tinned food. I knew that something to sit upon would present no problems, for my five

arna in those early days, and even now, despite the present misfortune of the house they form the basis of much of its furniture, though artifice and padding have done much to disguise their origin.

Ten years of going into retreat at Camusfearna have taught me, too, that if one waits long enough practically every imagin-

a westerly or south-westerly gale one may find almost anything. Fish-boxes—mostly stamped with the names of Mallug, Buckie, or Lossiemouth firms, but sometimes from France or Scandinavia—are too common to count, though they are still gathered, more from habit than from need. Fish baskets, big open two-handled baskets of withy, make firewood baskets and waste-paper baskets. Intact wooden tubs are a rarity, and I have found only three in my years here, it has amused me wryly to see cocktail

bars in England whose proprietors have through whimsy put them to use as stools as I have by necessity

A Robinson Crusoe or Swiss Family Robinson instinct is latent in most of us, perhaps from our childhood games of house-

that one of the commonest of all things among jetsam is the rubber hot-water bottle. They compete successfully—in the long straggling line of brown sea-wrack dizzy with jumping sand-hoppers—with odd shoes and empty boot-polish and talcum-powder tins, with the round corks that buoy lobster-pots and nets, even with the ubiquitous skulls of sheep and deer. A surprising number of the hot-water bottles are undamaged, and Camusfearna is by now overstocked with them, but from the damaged ones one may cut useful and highly functional table mats

At the beginning, however, there was no table to protect, and after my first days at Camusfearna it seemed clear that I should have to import at least one small load of essential furniture. This was not an easy matter, for there was no road approach and I

Conan Doyle's spiritualistic experiments she had been taught logic—rather unsuccessfully—by an uncle who had become a professor in America, she had friends, real ones in places. During the war, when she was already in<sup>1</sup> she married, very briefly, the contractor who was road outside her door, in a few months he was



killed, and Uilleamena reverted to her maiden name and never again mentioned her *mésalliance*. She was, I think, one of the warmest, most human, most delightful, and, perhaps, most domineering people I have ever known, and her faults were all on

those two screeching hullo to each other in demoniac crescendo)

asked for more), yet with all that, her personality was so spontaneous and vital and endearing that her death a few years ago hole in more hearts than she would have known. She left truly phenomenal amount of debts behind her, but it was a measure of her personality that she was able to owe her grocer £3,000.

Uilleamena sold me some really frightful furniture for Camusfeàrna—two small chests whose drawers open and close only

Camusfeàrna, the rest had just grown, found on the beach or constructed by ingenious friends who have stayed here, and

very large sofa; that is to say it appears to be a sofa, but in fact it is all fish-boxes, covered with sheet foam rubber under a cordu-

roy cover and many cushions. Next to it is a tall rectangle, draped over with a piece of material that was once the seat-cover of my cabin in the *Sea Leopard*, my chief shark-hunting boat, lift aside this relic and you are looking into a range of shelves filled with shoes—the whole structure is made of five fish-boxes with their sides knocked out. The same system, this time of orange-boxes from the shore and fronted by some very tasteful material from Primavera, holds shirts and sweaters in my bedroom, and looks entirely respectable. The art of fish-box furniture should be more widely cultivated, in common with certain widely advertised makes of contemporary furniture it has

clothes-basket,' and a few weeks later a clothes-basket came up on the beach, a large stately clothes-basket, completely undamaged.

Whether it is because the furnishings of these rooms have grown around me year by year since that first afternoon when I entered the chill and empty house, each room as bare as a weathered bone, or because of my deep love for Camusfearna

also a continuous sense of anticipation, it is as though a collector of period furniture might on any morning find some rare and important piece lying waiting to be picked up on the street before his door.

There is much pathos in the small jetsam that lies among the sea-wrack and drifted timber of the long tide-lines, the fire-blackened transom of a small boat, the broken and wave-battered children's toys, a hand-carved wooden egg-cup with the name 'John' carefully incised upon it, the scattered skeleton of a small dog the collar with an illegible nameplate lying among the whitened bones, long since picked clean by the ravens and hooded crows. To me the most personal poignancy was in search one morning that first year for a suitable pic

from which to fashion a bread-board. A barrel top would be

Some pieces of jetsam are wholly enigmatic, encouraging the

surrounded by cruising sharks or tossed high on the crests of Atlantic rollers a thousand miles from land? I have found no satisfactory solution. Two broom-handles, firmly tied into the form of a cross by the belt from a woman's plastic macintosh, a

others one may weave idle tapestries of mystery

But it is not only on such man-made objects as these that the imagination builds to evoke drama, pathos, or remembered splendour. When one is much alone one's vision becomes more

mummy, stained and thin, soars the spinning lapwing in the white March morning, in the surface crust of rotting weed, where the foot explodes a whirling puff of flies, the withered fins

ashore at Camusfearna itself, for the house stands on a south-facing bay in a west-facing coast line, and it gains, too, a little shelter from the string of islands that lead out from it to the

the  
that  
all about the sides' level

these caves were regularly inhabited by travelling pedlars, or whom there were many, for shops were far distant and communications virtually non-existent. They were welcome among the local people, these pedlars, for besides what they could sell they brought news from far-away villages and of other districts in which they travelled, they fulfilled the function of provincial newspapers, and the inhabitants of wild and lonely places awaited their coming with keen anticipation.

service a cave was perhaps safer than a glass-house if there were any stones to be thrown. Such pebbles that came his way seem mainly to have been on the question of his desertion. Jeannie was no slut nor Joe a slum-maker, and their troglodyte life was a neat and orderly affair, with a clean white tablecloth laid over the fish-box table for meals, meals that were of fish and crustacean



'Behold this dreamer', but because men fear proof of a power beyond their own, and are uncomfortable in the company of one who claims or admits to it. These people who are convinced of being endowed with what is now more usually called extra-

sceptical sophistication they do not share. Circumstantial tales of other less controversial matters survive in the oral tradition with but little change in these districts to which literacy came late in history, and there is no reason to assume that those concerning 'second sight' should have suffered disproportionate distortion.

My nearest neighbour at Camusfearna, Calum Murdo MacKinnon, of whom I shall have more to say presently, comes of Skye stock, and tells a tale of his forebears which by its very simplicity is hard to ascribe to past invention. In the days of his

plaid with which to signal at command. For more  
hour the boat rowed to and fro in the bay below

grapples hanging ready, but the old man sat with his blind head in his hands and said never a word. Suddenly he cried in a strong voice, 'Tog an tonnagl—Hoist the plaid!' His grandson did so, and the grapples sank and returned to the surface with the body of the drowned boy.

It is easier to be sceptical when one is not in the Hebrides, easier when one's vision is not clarified—or obscured—by the common sense of one's fellow men.

Very little survives in legend from the early inhabitants of Camusfearna, surprisingly little when one comes to consider that in all likelihood the community existed for thousands of years. The earliest stories date, probably, from the Middle Ages, and one of these tells of a wild sea reiver, born in the bay, who harried the coast to the southward—notably the Island of Mull, with its many secret harbours and well-had anchorages—in a galley, one of whose sides was painted black and the other white, an attempt, presumably, to refute description or to undermine morale by reports that in aggregate might give the impression of a pirate fleet. Whatever his tactics, they seem to have been successful, for

times that distance. Indeed few people ever have the experience, for the earth's surface is so overrun with mankind that where land is habitable it is inhabited, and whereas it is not difficult to pitch a camp in those circumstances it is very rare to be between four

separate bandillo. But to be quite alone where there are no other human beings is sharply exhilarating, it is as though some pres-

was the added strangeness of nights as light as noon, so that only the personal fact of sleep divided night from day, paradoxically, for the external circumstances were the very opposite, I had the same or an allied sensation during the heavy air-raids in 1940, as though life were suddenly stripped of inessentials such as worries about money and small egotistical ambitions and one was left facing an ultimate essential.

That first night as I lay down to sleep in the bare kitchen of



Camusfearna I was aware of the soft thump of rabbits' feet about the sand dune warren at the back of the house, the thin squeak of hawking bats, woken early by the warm weather from their winter hibernation, and the restless piping of oyster-catchers waiting for the turn of the tide, these were middle-distance sounds against the muffled roar of the waterfall that in still weather is the undertone to all other sound at Camusfearna.

I slept that night with my head pillowed upon Jonnie's soft fleece-like flank, as years before I had been wont to in open boats



wide, long and strong, with seven points one side and six on the other, a far nobler head than ever I had seen during my years of bloodthirstiness. I came to know these stags year by year, for they were a part of a group that passed every winter low in the Camusfeàrna burn, and Morag MacKinnon used to feed them at *Druimfiachlach*—a little surreptitiously, for they were outside the forest fence and on the sheep ground. Monarch, she called the thirteen-pointer, and though he never seemed to break out to the



rut in autumn I think he must have sired at least one stag-calf, for in the dark last year the headlights of my car lit up a partially stunned stag that had leapt at the concrete posts of the new forestry plantation fence, trying to get down to Camusfeàrna, and the head, though no more than a royal, was the very double of Monarch's wide sweep. I came near to killing him, for I thought that he was a stag wounded and lost by a stalking party from the lodge that day, but dazed as he was he managed to stagger out of the headlights' beam before I could get the rifle from its case.

of their antlers etching the near skyline, and they were in some

creatures were my neighbours.

English visitors who have come to Camusfearna are usually struck inarticulate by the desolate grandeur of the landscape and the splendour of pale blue and gold spring mornings, but they are entirely articulate in their amazement at the variety of wild life by which I am surrounded. Many Englishmen are, for example, quite unaware that wildcats are common animals in the West Highlands, and assume, when one refers to them, that one is speaking of domestic cats run wild, not of the tawny lynx-like ferals that had their den, that and every other year, within two hundred yards of my door. They bear as much relation to the domestic cat as does a wolf to a terrier, they were here before our first uncouth ancestors came to live in the caves below the cliffs, and they are reputedly untameable. When I first came here the estate on whose land the house stood had long waged war upon the wildcats, and a tree by the deer-larder of the lodge, four miles away, was decorated with their banded tails hanging like monstrous willow catkins from its boughs. Now, since the estate has turned from general agriculture to forestry, the wildcats are protected, for they are the worst enemy of the voles, who are in turn the greatest destroyers of the newly planted trees. Under this benign régime the number of wildcats has marvellously

many humans hold the line of the mountain as the strain that is dominant, in the lynx-like appearance, the extra claw, and the feral instinct, and the few half-breeds that escape destruction usually take to the hills and the den life of their male ancestors. An old river-watcher at Lochailort, who for some reason that now eludes me was known as Tipperary, told one night, awoken by the caterwauling outside, he had

door with a torch and in its beam had seen his own black-and-white she-cat in the fierce embrace of a huge wild tom. Thereafter he had waited eagerly for the birth of the kittens. When the time came she made her nest in the byre, and all that day he waited for the first birth, but at nightfall she had not yet brought forth. In the small hours of the morning he became conscious of piteous mewling at his door, and opened it to find his cat carrying in her mouth one wounded and dying kitten. In the dark back-

more but a pathetic trail of mangled new-born kittens. The single survivor, whom the mother had tried to carry to the house for sanctuary, died a few minutes later.

Wildcats grow to an enormous size, at least double that of the very largest domestic cat, this year there is one who leaves close to the house Homeric droppings of dimensions that would make an Alsatian wolfhound appear almost constipated. It is comparatively rare that one sees the animal in the

rings to his tail, and that first year at Camusfearna I twice saw the kittens at play in the dawn, frolicking among the primroses and

red-deer calves. Before man exterminated the rabbits they were the staple food both of the big leggy hull foxes and of these low-ground wildcats, and every morning I would see the heavily indented pad-marks in the sand at the burrow mouths. But now the rabbits have gone and the lambs are still here in their season, and as have there been

is nothing to show for those slow months in the womb but white

skeleton and a scrap of soft, soiled fleece that seems no bigger than a handkerchief.

Among the mammals it is, next to the wildcats, the seals that surprise my southern visitors most. Right through the summer months they are rarely out of sight, and, being unmolested at Camusfearna, they become very tame. In the evenings they will follow a dinghy through the smooth sunset-coloured water, their heads emerging ever nearer and nearer until they are no more than a boat's length away. It is only a change in rhythm that frightens them; one must row steadily onwards as if intent on one's own business and unconcerned with theirs. The brown seals, with their big round skulls and short, dog-like noses, are everywhere, and I have counted more than a hundred in an hour's run down the shore in the dinghy, besides these, which breed locally, the Atlantic seals stay round the islands from May till early autumn, when they return to their scattered and comparatively few breeding rocks. The Atlantic seals that spend the summer at Camusfearna probably breed on the rocks west of

silk and the sun is hot on the lichened rocks above the tide they loaf about the Camusfearna islands in twos and threes, usually bulls, eating largely of the rock fish and storing up energy to be

like feet long and weighs nearly half a ton they are splendid

heels After a few minutes of trying to shake him off I tried dodging and hiding behind rocks but he discovered me with amazing agility Finally I scrambled down to the boat and rowed quickly away but after twenty yards he was there beside me muzzling an oar I was in desperation to know what to do with this unexpected foundling whose frantic mother was now snorting twenty yards away when suddenly he responded to one of her calls and the two went off together the pup no doubt to receive the lecture of his life

The red-deer calves too have no natural fear of man during their first days of life and if in June one stumbles upon a calf lying dappled and sleek among the long green bracken stems one must avoid handling him if one wants to make a clean get-away I used to pet them and fondle them before I knew better, and my efforts to leave led to more frenzied games of hide-and seek than with the seal pup while a distracted hound stamped and barked unavailingly But while the calves during those first uninstructed days display no instinctive fear of humans, they are from the first terrified of their natural enemies the eagles, the wildcats and the foxes I have seen a hound trying to defend her calf from an eagle rearing up with her ears back and slashing wickedly with her sore hooves each time he stooped with an audible rush of wind through his great upswept pinions, if one hoof had struck home she would have brought him down disembowelled, but though she never touched more than a wingtip the eagle grew wary and finally sailed off down the glen, the sun gleaming whitely on the burnish of his mantle

It is the helpless red deer calves that are the staple food of the hill foxes in June and the young lambs in April and May, but what they live on for the rest of the year now that the rabbits have gone and the blue mountain hares become so scarce, remains a mystery to me Possibly they eat more seldom than we imagine, and certainly muce form a large part of their diet Some years ago I went out with a stalker to kill hill foxes after lambing time The foxes' cairn was some two thousand feet up the hill, and we left at dawn before the sun was up over hills that were still all snow at their summits, silhouetted against a sky that was apple-green

over the high tops. The terriers went into the cairn and we shot the vixen as she bolted, and the dogs killed and brought out the five cubs, but of the dog fox there was no sign at all. We found his footprints in a peat hag a few hundred yards below, going downhill, and he had not been galloping but quietly trotting so we concluded that he had left the cairn some time before we had reached it and was probably unaware of anything amiss. We sat down under cover to wait for his return.

We waited all day. The spring breeze blew fresh in our faces from where the sea and the islands lay spread out far below us, and we could see the ring-net boats putting out for the first of

throw, to bank sharply and veer off with a harsh rasp of air

been carrying, it was a nest of pink new-born mice—all he had found to bring home in a long day's hunting for his vixen and five cubs.

At first sight it is one of the enigmas of the country around Camusfearna, this great number of predators surviving with so little to prey upon, in the air the eagles, buzzards, falcons, ravens and hooded crows, and on the ground the wildcats, foxes, badgers and pine martens. There is no doubt that a surprising number of the animal species spend much time during the off seasons—when there are no young creatures to feed on—in their own hobby of beachcombing. In the soft sand around

wrack I come constantly upon the footprints of wildcats, badgers and foxes. Sometimes, they find oiled seabirds, sometimes the carcase of a sheep fallen from one of the green cliff ledges that throughout the West Highlands form such well-baited and often fatal traps, or of a stag that has tottered down from the March snowdrifts to seek seaweed as the only uncovered food, or they may creep up upon sleeping oyster-catchers and curlews as they wait in the dark for the turn of the tide. But whatever they find it is to the shore that the fanged creatures come at night, and at times perhaps, they find little, for I have seen undigested sand-hoppers in the droppings of both wildcats and foxes.



The ravens and hooded crows, though they will peck out the eyes of a living lamb or deer calf if he is weak, are in fact offal feeders for the greater part of the time. The hoodies spend much of their time about the shore in the late summer and midwinter, opening mussels by carrying them up to house-height and dropping them to smash on the rocks, but at most other seasons of the year there are routine harvests for them to gather elsewhere. In the back-end of winter, when the ground is as yet unstirred by spring, the old stags that have wintered poorly grow feeble and die in the snowdrifts and the grey scavengers squawk and squabble over the carcasses, a little later, when the first warmth comes, and the hinds interrupt their grazing to turn their heads and ruble irritably at their spines, the hoodies strut and pick around them, gobbling the fat warble-grubs that emerge from under the deer-hides and fall to the ground. When the lambing season comes they quarter the ground for the afterbirths, and







wind, and when she opened the door in the morning she saw that there was something very much amiss. The two parent

them all the while as she was wont. The cygnet napped and

Morag waded out, but the loch bottom is soft and black, and she was sinking thigh deep before she realized that she could not reach the cygnet. Then suddenly he turned and struggled towards her, stopped the thrashing of his wings and was still. Groping in the water beneath him Morag's hand came upon a wire on which she pulled until she was able to feel a rusty steel trap clamped to the cygnet's leg, a trap set for a fox, and fastened to a long wire so that he might drown himself and die the more quickly. Morag lifted the cygnet from the water, he lay passive in her arms while she eased the jaws open and as she did this the two parents swam right in and remained one on either side of her, as tame, as she put it as domestic ducks. neither did they swim away when she put the cygnet undamaged on to the water and began to retrace her steps.

The swans stayed for a week or more after that, and now they would not wait for her to call to them before greeting her. every time she opened her door their silver-sweet bell-like voices chimed to her from the lochan across the road. If Yeats had possessed the same strange powers as Morag, his nine and fifty swans would perhaps not have suddenly mounted, and his poem would not have been written.

It was not through childlessness that Morag had turned to animals as do so many spinsters, for she had three sons. The  
The

in result, and after the first weeks, when the family had become my friends, it was they who would carry my mail down from

walls as their diminutive statures and a broken ladder could compass. They carried the heavy white powder down from Drumfiachlach in paper bags, and one day I suggested that they would find it easier to use my rucksack. They were delighted with the suggestion and returned the following day with the whole rucksack full to the lip with loose Snowcem powder, and not only the main well of the rucksack but every zip-fastening pocket that the makers had designed for such personal possessions as toothbrushes and tobacco. That was nine years ago and the twins are grown-up and out in the world, but in wet weather that rucksack still exudes a detectable whitish paste at the seams.

And it is not easy at any time to victual a house

pense with altogether. It is not easy at any time to victual a house

Drumfiachlach, once a day, by a complicated mixture of sea and road transport from the railhead at the shopping village. From it they are carried by motor-launch to a tiny village five miles from Drumfiachlach, where originally a vast old Humber and now a Land Rover takes over and distributes them among the scattered dwellings of the neighbourhood. I am, therefore, reasonably

oversight or petulance), but I can only leave a reply to that post at Drumfiachlach the following night, for collection by the Land Rover on the morning after that, so that if I receive a letter on,

for example, a Tuesday evening it will be Friday before the sender gets my reply. Newspapers reach me on the evening of

ear to the set one may catch tantalizingly fragmentary snatches of news, too often of wars and rumours of wars, or of equally intrusive and unwelcome strains of rock 'n' roll, mouse-squeak reminders of far-off human frenzy, whose faintness underlines the isolation of Camusfearna more effectively than could utter silence.

In practice, the exchange of letters often takes a full week, and the frustrations inherent in this situation have led the more impatient of my friends to the copious use of telegrams. The

stood exhausted before my door bearing a message which read 'Many happy returns of the day'. The mountains had travailed and brought forth a mouse, after that I persuaded him, with great difficulty, to exercise his own judgment as to whether or not a telegram was urgent, and to consign those that were not to the Land Rover for delivery to Drumfiacloch in the evening.

Telegrams between the West Highlands and England are often liable to a little confusion in transit, to the production of what the services call 'corrupt groups'. During my first stay at Camusfearna I realized that though the house had, as it were, dropped into my lap from heaven, I had no subsidiary rights, a diet composed largely of shellfish might, I thought, be suitably varied by rabbits, and I telegraphed to the owner of the estate to ask

permission. The telegram he received from me read: 'May I please shoot at Robert and if so where?'

The reply to this sadistic request being in the affirmative, I shot at Robert morning and evening, with a silenced .22 from the



kitchen window, and he went far to solve the supply problem both for myself and for my dog Jonnie. Alas, Robert and all his brothers have now gone from Camusfearna, and except by living entirely from the sea it is difficult to approach self-subsistence.

For a year or two there was goats' milk, for Morag had,

but a token gesture, for the little nanny was unaware of any change in ownership, preferring the company of her co-concubines and her rancid, lecherous overlord. The herd, however, took to spending much of their time at Camusfearna, where they would pick their way delicately along the top of the croft wall to

door, and more than once I came back to the house from an afternoon's fishing to find the kitchen in chaos, my last loaves disappearing between agile rubbery lips, and Mauri Bhan posturing impudently on the table.

In the end their predilection for Camusfàrna was their undoing, for where a past occupier of the house had once grown a

his harem, so gross both in odour and in behaviour, that only the undeniable splendour of his appearance prevented my joining the



ranks of his numerous enemies. He survived, a lonely satyr, a sad solitary symbol of thwarted virility, until the burden of his chastity became too great for him, and he wandered and perished.

The goats were not the only invaders of the house, for in those days there was no fence surrounding it, and a door left ajar was taken as tacit invitation to the most improbable and unwelcome of visitors. Once, on my return to the house after a few hours'

mallet, conjured an image worse, if possible, than the usual reality. Half-way up the wooden stairway, where it turns at right angles to reach the small landing, an enormous, black, and strikingly pregnant cow was wedged fast between the two walls, unable to progress forward and fearful of the gradient in reverse. Her rear aspect, whose copious activity—whether under the stress of anxiety or from an intelligent desire to reduce



Electric Board, before that all the houses were lit by paraffin lamps, and many of the people cooked by Primus stove. Yet, despite the notoriously capricious quality of the electric light in the north-west Highlands, every single shop in every single village immediately stopped stocking paraffin, methylated spirits, and candles. Last year, there was to my certain knowledge, no drop of methylated spirits for sale within a hundred miles. The friendly spirit of co-operation is, however, equal even to this situation: once I sent an S O S for methylated



spirits to a distant village and received an odd-looking package in return. It did not look like methylated spirits, and I unwrapped it in puzzlement. Inside was a pencil note which I deciphered with difficulty 'Sorry no methylated spirits but am sending you two pounds of sausages instead.'

With a view to avoiding the monotony of tinned food I began early to experiment with edible fungi, but the results were not encouraging, and I have never succeeded in making them a substantial item of Camusfearna diet. I possessed two books, representing respectively and most decoratively the edible and



considerably more varieties than existed in both books put together. With these arranged like a palette of pastel shades upon the kitchen table and both slim volumes at hand for consultation I began eagerly to separate the sheep from the goats. Almost at once however I discovered that every edible species had a poisonous counterpart whose uniform was so exactly similar as to defy detection. At the end of half an hour I gathered friend

brown top like a but and tastes strongly of mushroom. I e *chanterelles* delicate orange creatures shaped like toy trumpets grow in enormous profusion under the trees about the hill side burns but though an eighteenth-century writer said of them that dead men would come to life at the taste I have found them flavourless and insipid their beauty but skin deep more appropriate to the magic of moss and fern and rushing water than to the table.

As children the members of my family were brought up to regard fungi with a conservative eye and though we gathered and consumed vast quantities of horse mushrooms we were taught to believe that puffballs were poisonous. More recently I have learned that they are not but how they have won the

*per excellence* Sometimes I wonder whether their adulators have ever tasted them. Miss Rowena Farre ate them in *Seal Morning* if one may put it that way and found them delicious.

So the fungi at Camusfearna remain for the most part un-

and appreciative touches whose perceptions are undimmed by attempted identification of their diet.

## CHAPTER THREE

I HAD been at Camusfearna for eight years before I piped water to the house, before that it came from the burn in buckets. During the first years there was a stout stone-pierced bridge across the burn, and under it one could draw water that had not been fouled by the cattle at their ford a little lower than, in 1933, the bridge was swept away by a winter spate and there was none built again for five years. In the summer there is no more than a foot or so of water among the stones, deepening to three or four feet when it runs amber-coloured and seemingly motionless between the alder banks but wedged high among the branches are wads of debris that show the level of its torrential winter spates. When the gales blow in from the south-west and the

branches ten feet and more above the stream

After the bridge had gone, the winter crossing of the burn to climb the hill to *Drumfiachlach* was always perilous, sometimes impossible. I stretched a rope between the alders from bank to bank, but it was slender support, for even when the water was no more than thigh deep the pure battering weight of it as it surged down from the waterfall would sweep one's legs from the bottom and leave one clinging to the rope without foothold, feet trailing seaward.

The purely natural changes that have taken place during my ten years at Camusfearna are astonishing. One is inclined to think of such a landscape as immutable without the intervention of man, yet in these few years the small alterations to the scene have been continuous and progressive. The burn has swept the soil from under its banks so that the alder roots show white and bare, and some of the trees have fallen, where there are none at the burn side the short green turf has been tunnelled under &

water so that it falls in and the stream's bed becomes even wider and shallower. Farther down towards the sea, where the burn bends round to encircle Camusfearna, the burrowing of a colony of sand martins in the sand cliff that is its landward bank has had the same effect, undermining the turf above so that it gives beneath the sheeps' feet and rolls down to the water's edge. Below the sand martins' burrows is now a steep slope of loose sand where ten years ago it was vertical. The sand dunes between the house and the sea form and re-form, so that their contour is never the same for two years though the glaucous, rasping marram grass that grows on them imparts an air of static permanency. The whole structure of these dunes that now effectively block much of the beach from the house, and incidentally afford to it some shelter from the southerly gales, is in any case a thing of recent times for I am told that when the present house was built fifty-odd years ago the field stretched flat to the sea, and the seaward facing wall of the house was left windowless for that reason.

The beach itself wherever the rock does not shelve straight into the sea is in constant change too: broad belts of shingle appear in the sand where there was no shingle before, soft stretches of

suns

Even the waterfall to me perhaps the most enduring symbol of

asleep to it dreams with it and wakens to it the note changes with the season from the dull menacing roar of winter nights to the low crooning of the summer, and if I hold a shell to my ear it

cynths among the fern and mosses. In spring it is loud with bird

song from the chaffinches that build their lichen nests in the forks of the alders, and abob with wagtails among the stones. This part of the burn is 'pretty' rather than beautiful, and it seems to come from nowhere, for the waterfall is hidden round a corner and the

for the all

from the

the smooth-flowing, unbroken water the look of spun green glass

For most of the year the waterfall has volume enough for a man to stand on a ledge between it and the rock and remain almost dry, between oneself and the sky it forms a rushing,

whether the water were cold or hot. Only when one steps from it again, and the flying icy drops tingle on the skin, does the sensation become one of snow water.

It would seem that the waterfall could

by year its form differs as a new boulder is swept down by the spates to lodge above its lip, or a tree falls from its precarious grip on the cliff face above it and jams the doorway of its emergence, or a massive section of rock breaks away, split by the prising leverage of slow-growing tree roots.

In spring and autumn the natural decoration surrounding the waterfall surpasses anything that artifice could achieve, in spring the green banks above the rock are set so thickly with primroses that blossom almost touches blossom, and the wild blue hyacinths spring from among them seemingly without leaf, in late summer and autumn the scarlet rowanberries flare from the ferned rock walls, bright against the falling white water and the darkness of the rock.

It is the waterfall, rather than the house, that has always seemed to me the soul of Camusfearna, and if there is anywhere in the world to which some part of me may return when I am dead it will be there.

If it is the waterfall that seems the soul of Camusfearna, it is the burn and the sea that give its essential character, that sparkling silver that rings the green field and makes it almost an island. Below the house the beach is long and shelving, the tide running back at low springs for more than two hundred yards over alternate stone and sand. There is only one thing lacking at Camusfearna, within its narrow compass it contains every attraction but an anchorage. To look down from the hull above upon the bay and the scattered

islands, each one of these seem not to be a part of the land but a

thought of those interminable hauls to and from the water's edge,

and I bought a little nine-foot flat-bottomed pram that one could almost pick up. But to have a boat again at all, even that toy, brought a hankering to extend one's range up and down the coast and over to Skye, and now I have two dinghies with out-board motors, one of them a sturdy lifeboat's dinghy of fifteen

feet, with decked-in bows. There are moorings laid in the bay where the burn flows out to the sea, and the pram is kept drawn

water can become in a matter of minutes an iron-grey menace raging in white at the crests of massive waves. But the coming to live at the beach is a relief, and the sea is no longer to be feared. It is to be able to see the nearest

almost drift buoy, the only one in the bay.

because for all of us the sea's edge remains the edge of the unknown.

gaze some partial knowledge which can but increase it, and he

whose eye finds wealth at the sea's edge. There are more shells than I have seen on any other littoral: a great host of painted bivalves of bewildering variety and hue, from coral pinks and primrose yellows to blues and purples and mother-of-pearl, from jewel-like fan shells no bigger than a little fingernail to the great scallops as big as a side-plate, nutshells and Hebridean ark shells and pearly top-shells and delicate blush-pink cowries. The sand-bars and beaches between the islands are formed of the disc-

## RING OF BRIGHT WATER

china beads A little above the shells, because they are heavier, lies a filigree of white and purple coral loose pieces each of which would lie in the palm of a hand, but there are so many of them that they form a dense brittle layer over the sand On still summer days when the tide wells up the beaches without so much as a wrinkle or ripple of wavelet at its edge the coral floats off on the meniscus of the water so that the sea seems to be growing flowers as an ornamental pond grows water lilies, delicately branched white and purple flowers on the aquamarine of the clear water



Where shells lie thick it is often those that are broken that have the greatest beauty of form, a whelk is dull until one may see the sculptural perfection of the revealed spiral the skeletal intricacy of the whorled mantle Many of the shells at Camusfearna, and the stones, too have been embroidered with the white lumpy tunnels of the Serpulid tube-worm, strange hieroglyphics that even in their simplest forms may appear urgently significant, the symbols of some forgotten alphabet and when a surface is thickly encrusted it assumes the appearance of Hindoo temple carving or of Rodin's 'Gates of Hell' precise in every riotous ramification Parts of the sculpture appear almost representational, a terrified beast flees before a pursuing predator, a well-meaning saint impales a dragon, the fingers of a hand are raised, like those of a Byzantine Christ, in a gesture that seems one of negation rather than benediction.

But above all it is the fantastic colouring of the beaches that as an image overpowers the minutiae Above the tide-line the grey rocks are splashed gorse-yellow with close-growing lichen, and with others of blue-green and salmon pink. Beneath them are the vivid orange-browns and siennas of wrack-weeds, the violet of

mussel-beds, dead-white sand, and water through which one sees

The beaches are rich, too, in edible shellfish. Besides the

duced many years ago by a former owner of the estate in a little circular bay almost closed from the sea and no more than twenty yards across where a trickle of fresh water comes down over the

covered where the bed lies. This is as well perhaps for you pass that by now the colony would have succumbed to my gluttony

sand patches between the weed are rarely unsuccessful. A variety of unc anc

crab. It was not only the enormously long legs and absence of

not reassuring

I must confess to a slight but perceptible revulsion to



before they are prepared for eating, greatest in the case of the spider crab and in *diminuendo* down to the hermit-crabs that inhabit empty shells, for their unattractive nakedness is decently covered in someone else's discarded finery. Hermit crabs have given rise to some of the few occasions in my adult life on which I have laughed out loud when quite alone. Sometimes when gathering periwinkles to eat, bucket in hand and scooping them several dozen to a swipe, my attention has been caught by some monster winkle at the floor of a pool, one that would at least provide a mouthful for a marmoset rather than a mouse. Even as my fingers have broken the surface of the water, shaping themselves avidly for capture the shell, its bluff so accidentally called,

maintain the deception

## CHAPTER FOUR



SPRING comes late to Camusfàrna. More than one year I have motored up from the south early in April to become immobilized in snowdrifts on the passes twenty miles from it, and by then the stags are still at the roadside down the long glen that leads to the sea. By mid-April there is still no tinge of green bud on the bare birches and rowans nor green underfoot, though there is often, as when I first came to Camusfàrna, a spell of soft still weather and clear skies. The colours then are predominantly pale blues, russet browns, and purples, each with the clarity of fine enamel, pale blue of sea and sky, the russet of dead bracken and fern, deep purple-brown of unbudded birch and the paler violets of the Skye hills and the peaks of Rhum. The landscape is lit by three whites—the pearl white of the birch trunks, the dazzle of the shell-sand beaches, and the soft filtered white of the high snows. The primroses are beginning to flower about the burn and among the island banks, though all the high hills are snow-covered and the lambs are as yet unborn. It is a time that has brought me, in all too few years, the deep contentment of knowing that the true spring and summer are still before me at Camusfàrna, that I shall see the leaf break and the ground become green, and all the snow melt from the hills but for a few

... and, when the snow has melted to their thawing breeding grounds,  
 ... whooper swans'  
 ... The eider ducks  
 have arrived to breed about the shore and the islands; they bring  
 with them that most evocative and haunting of all sounds of the  
 Hebridean spring and summer, the deep, echoing, wood-wind  
 crooning of the courting drakes



One by one the breeding bird species return to the beaches and  
 the islands where they were hatched, the sand martins to the sand  
 cliff at the burn foot, the wheatears to the rabbit burrows in the  
 ... of the ... and the ...

scattered with broken shellfish is vibrant with the clang of their  
 calling and the ... or  
 three pairs of ... ed  
 and vulturin ... ul,  
 segregated shrilly on to a neighbouring promontory, beady  
 mistrustful of the coarse language and predatory predilections of  
 their neighbours, and, lastly, not until well into May, come  
 ...

steel oar-beat of their wings spring has almost given place to  
 summer.

By then the colour everywhere is green. The purple birch  
 twigs are hidden in a soft cloud of new leaf, the curled, almond-  
 bitter rods of young bracken have in those short weeks pushed up  
 three feet from the earth, and unfurled a canopy of green frond  
 over the rust of last year's growth; the leaves of the yellow flag

its that margin the burn and the shore form a forest of broad bayonets, and the islands, that but for rank rooty patches of heather growing knee-deep seemed so bare in April, are smothered with a jungle-growth of goose grass and brar. To me there is always something a little stifling in this enveloping green stain, this redundant, almost Victorian, drapery over bones that need no blanketing, and were it not for the astringent presence of the sea I should find all that verdure as enervating as an Oxford water-meadow in the depths of summer. Perhaps 'depraved' is the right word after all.

Early in May comes the recurrent miracle of the elvers' migration from the sea. There is something deeply awe-inspiring about the sight of any living creatures in incomputable numbers, it stirs, perhaps, some atavistic chord whose note belongs more properly to the distant days when we were a true part of the

three inches long nor thicker than a meat-skewer, steel-blue when seen from above, but against the light transparent except for a red

yet it is difficult to imagine that there can have been vaster hoards than reach the Camusfearna burn, still more difficult to realize that these are but a tiny fraction of the hosts that are simultaneously ascending a myriad other burns.

Where the burn flows calm through the level ground their armies undulate slowly and purposefully forward towards the seemingly insurmountable barrier of the falls, on, above the bridge, into the stretch where the water rushes and stumbles over uneven stones, round the rock-twist to the foot of the falls. Here, temporarily daunted or resting before their assault upon the vertical, spray-wet rock face, they congregate almost motionless in the rock pools, forming a steel-blue carpet inches deep, dip a bu

here, and it comes up with a greater volume of elvers than of water. Some mistake the true course of the burn, and follow steep trickles leading to *cul-de-sac* pools of spray water, to and from these (for the miraculous powers of their multitudes do not appear to include communication or deduction), there are simultaneous streams of ascending and descending elvers, while the spray-pool itself is filled to the brim with an aimlessly writhing swarm.

It is here that the elvers are met by the herons who stand there scooping them up by the bill-full, decimating yet again, on the verge of their destination, the remnants of the great concourse that has been travelling thus perilously for two years.

But one has not been witness to the long core, as it were, of that mighty migration and so it is in the elvers' final ascent of the falls that the colossal driving power of their instinct becomes most apparent to the onlooker. At first, where at the edges of the falls the water splashes into shallow stone troughs among the horizontal ledges, the way is easy—a few inches of horizontal climb and the elver has reached the next trough. But after a foot or two of this ladder-like progression they are faced either with the battering fall of white water at their left or with a smooth black stretch of rock wall in front, but every few seconds by heavy splashes of spray. For a few feet at the bottom of this wall grows a close slimy fur of waterweed, and among its infinitesimal tendrils the elvers twine themselves and begin, very slowly, to squirm their way upwards, forming a vertical, close-packed column perhaps two feet wide. Some

bewildering numbers, that makes the mind rebel both at the

blind strength of their instinct and their inherent power to implement it, as though the secret power-house should be visible

Once above the water-draggled weed there is no further incidental support for the climbing elvers, there is just sheer wet rock, with whatever macroscopic roughness their transparent bellies may apprehend. They hang there, apparently without gravity, with an occasional convulsive movement that seems born of despair. They climb perhaps six inches in an hour, sometimes slithering backward the same distance in a second, and there are a further twelve feet of rock above them

It is not possible for more than a moment or two to identify oneself with any single one of this mass, but there is a sense of

some, certainly, surmount the second and third falls too, and I have seen elvers of that size more than two thousand feet up the peak where the burn has its source. In perspective, the survival rate must be high when compared with that of spermatozoa.



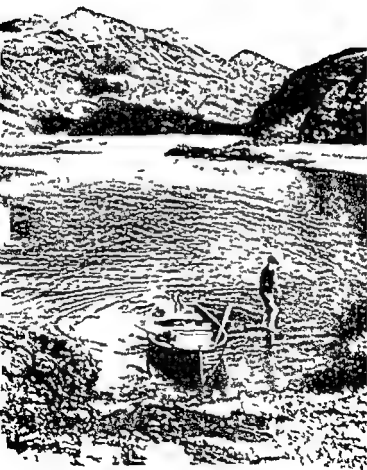
Only once at Camusfearna have I seen any other living creatures in numbers to compare with those elvers, but I remember the occasion vividly. In the warm evenings of later summer, when the sun still flared a finger's breadth above the saw-tooth peaks of the Cullin and glowed on the dense red berries of the rowans, the MacKinnon children would come down the hill

and the feathery white stub of his tail would scuff softly on the stone floor. I would go to the open door and listen and Jonnie would sit very upright on the stone flags outside, staring up at the high skyline with his nose twitching and questing, and I would hear nothing but the so-soft-of-sea-making-water and

sound of wavelets breaking in a small tumble of foam along the shore; there was the twitter of sand martins hawking flies in the still golden air, the croak of a raven, and gull voices from the sea that stretched away as smooth as white silk to the distant island of Eigg lying across the sea horizon. Sometimes there was the warning thump of a rabbit from the warren among the dunes behind the house

horizon it would be some five minutes before they had descended the last and steepest part of the track, crossed the bridge, and come up over the green grass to the door, and all the time I would be wondering what they had brought—longed-for or unwelcome letters, some supplies that I urgently needed, a bottle of goat's milk from their mother, or just nothing at all. When it was nothing I was at once relieved and bitterly disappointed, for at Camusfearna I both resent the intrusion of the outside world and crave reassurance of its continued existence.

their cries from the beach. I went out to a scene that is as fresh in my mind now as though it were hours rather than years that lay between.



A ba nea Ci nu feărna



Jonnie above Camusfearr

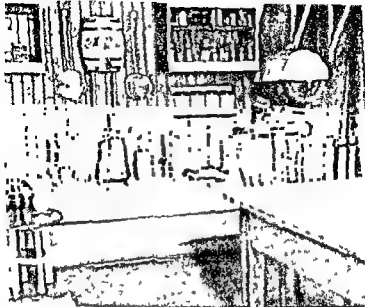


Figure 1





The sun was very low; the shadow of the house lay long and dark across the grass and the rushes, while the hill-side above glowed golden as though seen through orange lenses. The bracken no longer looked green nor the heather purple, all that gave back their own colour to the sun were the scarlet rowan-berries, as vivid as venous blood. When I turned to the sea it was  
 . . . . . deep in the  
 . . . . . bronze-  
 . . . . . they were

shouting and laughing and dancing and scooping up the water with their hands, and all the time as they moved there shot up from the surface where they broke it a glittering spray of small old and silver fish, so dense and brilliant as to blur the outline of the childish figures. It was as though the boys were the central décor of a strangely lit Baroque fountain, and when they bent to the surface with cupped hands a new jet of sparks flew upward where their arms submerged, and fell back in brittle, dazzling cascade.

When I reached the water myself it was like wading in silver treacle, our bare legs pushed against the packed mass of little fish as against a solid and reluctantly yielding obstacle. To scoop and to scatter them, to shout and to laugh, were as irresistible as though we were treasure hunters of old who had stumbled upon  
 . . . . . diamonds about us like

... a way that a hundred yards out the surface was turned by flurries of mackerel whose darting shoals made a sputter of spray on the smooth swell of the incoming tide

driven the fry headlong before them into the narrow bay and held them there, but now the pursuers too were unable to go back. They were in turn harried from seaward by a school of porpoises who cruised the outermost limit of their shoals, driving them farther and farther towards the shore. Hunter and hunted pushed the herring soil ever inward to the sand, and at length every wavelet broke on the beach with a tumble of silver sprats. I wondered that the porpoises had not long since glutted and gone; then I saw that, like the fry and the mackerel that had pursued them into the bay, the porpoises' return to the open waters of the sound was cut off. Beyond them, black against the

The sun went down behind the Cuillin and the water grew cold and the tide crawled grey up the beach, clogged with its helpless burden of fish, and long after the distance had become too dim to see the killer's fin we could hear the putter of the rushing mackerel as they moved in with the tide. When it was nearly dark we fetched buckets and dipped them in the sea's edge, they came up heavy in our hands, full not of water but of thumb-length fish.

In the morning it was dead low tide, and the sea, as still as a mountain tarn as far as the eye could reach, had gone back some two hundred yards. The tide-wrack of high-water mark lay right along the slope of the beach.

heaven sends bounty it too often sends monotony. The first meal

of fried whitebait had the delight of novelty and of windfall, akin to the pleasure that for the first few days I take in some humble but new treasure harvested from the shore after gales, the second had lost little, but the sixth and seventh were cloying, while there were still three buckets full. Jonnie, who entertained an unnatural passion for fish of all kinds, ate more than I did, but the level in the buckets seemed never to diminish, a guest came to stay, and we made them into fish-cakes and fish-pies, into kedgeree and fish-soups, into curries and savouries, until at last one merciful morning they began to smell. Then we used them to bait the lobster-pots, but after a while even the lobsters seemed to grow weary of them.

It so happened that about that time I made one of my rare shopping journeys to Inverness. The second item on the hotel luncheon menu was fried whitebait, and the dining-room was rich with the once-appetizing aroma. I left that hotel as might one who had perceived a corpse beneath his table and it was some two years before I could eat whitebait again.



## CHAPTER FIVE



THE smaller members of the whale tribe are a feature of every summer at Camusféarna. Sometimes the great whales, the Blue and the Rorquals, pass majestically through the Sound be-

Of all sea creatures whales hold for me a particular fascination, stemming, perhaps, from the knowledge of their enormously developed brains coupled with the unguessable, pressing, muffled

number of people who, because of the superficial similarities of bulk and habitat, confuse them with the great sharks whose brains are minute and rudimentary. Although from early times whaling men have had strange tales to tell of their quarry's extraordinary mental powers it is only comparatively recently that these things have become accepted fact. The American 'oceanariums' have allowed their porpoise and dolphin inmates to reveal themselves as highly intelligent, amiable, and playful personalities who evince an unexpected desire to please and co-operate with human beings. They will play ball games with their attendants, come up out of the water to greet them, and retrieve

with obvious pleasure ladies' handbags and kindred objects that have accidentally fallen into their tank. They are also capable of unquestionable altruism to one another, like many animals but perhaps even more than most, their behaviour compares very favourably with that of the human species. Yet for the oil in the blubber that insulates them from the cold of polar seas man has from the earliest days reserved for the whales the most brutal and agonizing death in his armoury, the harpoon buried deep in living flesh.

Until very lately zoologists held that whales were dumb, and both the system of communication that made possible concerted action by widely separated individuals, and the 'sixth sense' by which they could detect the presence of objects in water too murky for vision, remained undiscovered. We have long

only now beginning to approach methods of perception that the whales have always owned as their birthright. Not only can they

water recording devices have now also established that hundreds of the whale tribe keep up an almost continual conversational

ied that they were dumb. If a whale's cry of pain when struck with a harpoon had been audible it is just possible, but only just, that man would have felt more self-hatred in their slaughter, though the sight of two adult whales trying to keep the blow-hole of a wounded calf above water has failed to change the attitude of whaler to whale.

It is not, of course, easy for the casual shore visitor or boat passenger to deduce from the discreet, momentarily-glimpsed



of a porpoise all these complex and stimulating attributes of its owner, surprisingly few people, in fact appear even to know that a porpoise is a whale

The porpoises, six-foot lengths of sturdy grace, are the commonest of all the whale visitors to the Camusfearna bay. Unlike the rumbustious dolphins they are shy, retiring creatures, and one requires leisure and patience to see more of them than that little hooked fin that looks as if it were set on the circumference of a slowly-revolving wheel, leisure to ship the oars and remain motionless and patience to allow curiosity to overcome timidity. Then the porpoises will blow right alongside the boat, with a little gasp that seems of shocked surprise, and at these close quarters the wondering inquisitiveness of their eyes shows as plainly as it can in a human face—a child's face as yet uninhibited against the display of emotion. The face like the faces of all whales but the killer appears good-humoured, even bonhomous. But they will not stay to be stared at, and after that quick gasp

o

a whole week in the Camusfearna bay and they would seem almost to hang about waiting for the boat to come out and play with them. They never leapt and sported unless the human audience was close at hand, but when we were out among them with the outboard motor they would play their own rollicking and hilarious games of hide-and-seek with us, and a sort of aquatic blind-man's-buff in which we in the boat were all too literally blind to them, and a target for whatever surprises they could devise. The beginning followed an invariable routine, they would lead, close-packed, their fins thrusting from the water with a long powerful forward surge every five or ten seconds, and we would follow to see how close we could get to them. When we were within fifty feet or so there would be a sudden silence while, unseen, they swooped back under the boat to reappear dead astern of us. Sometimes they would remain submerged for many minutes, and we would cut the engine and wait. This was the dolphins' moment. As long as I live, and

1. I shall remember the

at the very boat's side. At the time it gave me a *déjà-vu* sensation that I could not place, afterwards I realized that it recalled irre-

from the waves

In this school of dolphins there were some half a dozen calves, not more than four or five feet long as against their parents' twelve. The calves would keep close alongside their mothers' flanks—the right hand side always—and I noticed that when the mothers leapt they kept their acrobatics strictly within the capabilities of their offspring, rising no more than half the height of those unencumbered by children.

The members of this school of dolphins spoke with voices perfectly audible to human ears rarely when they were very close to the boat, but usually when they were heading straight away at a distance of a hundred yards or two. As they broke the surface with that strong forward-thrusting movement, one or more of their number would produce something between a shrill whistle and a squeak, on a single note held for perhaps two seconds. It seems strange that I can find no written record of any whale-sound as plainly and even obtrusively audible above water as this.



The Risso's Grampus or more properly Risso's Dolphin a few feet larger than the Bottle-nose visits Camusfearna bay in the summer too but whereas in the shark fishery days I used to

decorous almost always cows with small tubby calves intent on the serious business of feeding and avoiding danger. They would not allow the boat nearly as close to them as would the other dolphins unlike whom they seemed to resent human presence and would soon leave the bay altogether if frequently followed.

Contrary to information contained in the majority of textbooks in which Russo's dolphin is described as a rarity it is in fact the commonest of all the lesser whales to visit the Hebrides in summer. During my years in the shark fishery when our chief catcher the *Sea Leopard* would cruise day-long in search of a different shape of fin it was a rare week in which we had not met with half a dozen schools of them. As with most other species of whale the fishermen have their own names for them names that they sometimes to the confusion of an enquiring scientist use to describe several separate species so that it is only by the comparatively very rare strandings of individual whales that the presence of a species becomes established. The ring net men call Russo's dolphin lowpers or dunters words deriving from the habit of seemingly aimless and random leaping. Neither Russo's nor the Bottle-nosed dolphins travel as do the white-sided and common dolphins by a series of long leaps low over the waves both seem to jump only when they are at leisure and frolicking.

In fact it is not easy for an eye with any practice to confuse the fin of Russo's dolphin with any other than that of a cow Killer whale. Cow is a strange feminine noun to give to the most terrible animal in the sea bull is little better for her butcher mate but the forms are fixed by long usage and must stand. Imaginations have strained to find a simile from land animals the Killer has been called the wolf of the sea, the tiger of the sea the hyena of the sea but none of these is really apt and probably

contents produce so immediate an image that they will perhaps bear one more repetition. That particular Killer was found to contain no fewer than thirteen porpoises and fourteen seals. A gargantuan meal, one would say for a leviathan yet by com-

parison with the great whales the Killer is a small beast, the bull no more than twenty-five feet overall and the cow a mere fifteen, while an adult porpoise is six feet long and the average among the seal species little less. Killers hunt in packs, and not even the great whales themselves are safe from them, the pack goes for the mighty tongue which in itself may weigh a ton and when it is torn out the giant bleeds to death while the Killers feed.

As I am not a fisherman, I do not know the work of a Killer in killing mood. On days when the house men have told me how they have seen the Killers slash seals for sport and not for food, and leave them maimed and dying among the skerries.

There are other the typical work of a Killer in killing mood. On days when the house men have told me how they have seen the Killers slash seals for sport and not for food, and leave them maimed and dying among the skerries.

A Killer or two comes every year to Camusfearna, but they do not linger, and if they did I would compass their deaths by any means that I could, for they banish the other sea life from my surroundings, also, I do not care to be among them in a small boat. There are many tales, but few, if any authenticated records, of their attacking human beings, however I do not want to be the first. Last year a single bull terrorized the tiny harbour of the Isle of Carina the summer through. John Lorne-Campbell shared my aversion to being a guinea pig for dietary research.

away, and I daresay my advice did not seem as sound and constructive on Carina as it did to me at Camusfearna.

No strange sea monster has ever come my way since I have been here though in the summer of 1959 there was something not easily explicable close by. It was seen by Tex Geddes, once a

On Sunday 13th September, he took this visitor, a Mr Gavin, an engineer from Hertfordshire, to fish for mackerel off the southern tip of Soay. It was a hot, flat-calm day, with every object at the sea's surface visible for miles. At about four o'clock in the afternoon Mr Gavin drew Tex's attention to a large black object about a mile away in the direction of Loch Slapin. The mackerel were playing on the surface and making the sea boil all round the boat, so Tex did not at first take any notice, and went on fishing, facing in the opposite direction. The object, however, drew steadily nearer, and at length both men stopped fishing in order to watch it. When it was some two hundred yards away Tex noticed a party of five Killer whales not far off in the direction of the Island of Rhum. Tex trusts Killers no more than I do; in the words of his letter to me the next day 'I was not sure what kind of a thing this was that was slowly making up on us—it certainly did not look like a Killer, but nevertheless I was not over thrilled'.

As it drew near, he first thought that it was a tortoise or a turtle, but as it came abreast of the boat he changed his mind. The head of the creature was about two-and-a-half feet out of the water, a head that had 'two huge round eyes like apples', and

The mouth opened and shut rhythmically, showing a red interior and emitting a wheezing sound that reminded Tex of a cow with pleurisy. He could see neither nostrils nor ears. Some two feet behind the head the back showed, higher than the head, and eight feet or more long, it rose steeply to a gradual fall aft, dark brown, but not as dark as the head. This back was not smooth but 'rose out of the water like the Cullin hills', as Tex wrote in his letter to me the next day. The impression, he said, was of an animal weighing some five tons.

At its nearest point the creature was no more than fifteen or

and in such ideal conditions of visibility and proximity it would be difficult for either or both men to have been victims of optical illusion. It is not, incidentally, the first tale, or even the second, of monsters in the vicinity of Soay.

My old quarry the Basking Sharks I have seen but seldom since they ceased to be my bread and butter, or rather my quest for bread and butter. The first Basking Shark with which I ever came



to grips, sixteen crowded years ago was, by a strange coincidence, just out to sea from Camusfearna lighthouse, but in the ten years on and off that I have lived here since, I have only seen sharks on a bare half-dozen occasions, and most of them a long way off. No doubt they have often been showing at times when I was not there to see them. Only once have I seen them right close inshore, and then they were being hunted by my successors. I had been sitting up all night with my dog Jonnie, who was at the very edge of death, and I was too crushed with sadness and weariness to

recoveries seem no longer related in sequence. I had been in the last week of April not well,

he was a dog of enormous strength, but he was growing old, and his heart was not a young dog's heart.

At the end of one desperate night sitting with him at C

fiachlach, Morag relieved me after she had seen to her family's wants, and I set off down the hill for Carnusfearna, dazed and unhappy and longing desperately to get into bed and sleep. When I came to the part of the road . . .

One day when the tide was out, there was a storm of thrashing spray about her bows, and from the gun in her stern drifted a thin haze of cordite smoke. A little farther out to sea were showing the vast dorsal fins of two more sharks. I saw the white water at the boat's bows subside as the harpooned shark sounded, and I sat and watched the whole familiar procedure as they got the wunches started and hauled for half an hour before they had him back at the surface, I saw that great six-foot tail break water and lash and slam the boat's sides while they struggled, as I had struggled so often before, to lasso the wildly lunging target, I saw it captured and made fast—yet because of my own state of exhaustion and preoccupation the whole scene was utterly without meaning to me, and I had no moment of mental participation while the small figures of the crew scurried about the deck in pursuance of a routine that had once been my daily life. Yet at other times, when I have watched through the



Though Jonnie survived pneumonia to become seemingly as strong as before, the writing was on the wall. A few months later he developed cancer of the rectum, and while it was, I think, not a bad thing to have a dog of great dignity and clean-

MacKinnon, to whom he accorded a devotion no less than to myself, but when I came back after months of absence he would go mad with joy like a puppy and lead the way down the path to Camusfearna as if I had never left it. But it was with Morag that he died at last, for I was too cowardly to travel north and watch my old friend killed, as in all humanity he had to be.

Camusfearna is a very long way from a vet, the nearest, in fact, is on the Island of Skye, nearly fifty miles away by road and ferry-boat. When he visited Jonnie that winter of 1954 he said that the disease

it came would  
the rectum.

surviving what would now be a major operation but he was insistent that action must be taken at once either to end Jonnie's life or to prolong it.

I had no car with me that year, so I hired one for the whole journey, to wait during the operation and to bring me back at night, either alone or with what I was warned would in any event be an unconscious dog. Jonnie loved car journeys, and he was enthusiastic to start on this one, as we bumped over the

and he alone and

help to give





himself indoors, so that he had to be carried outside in that bitter weather and supported to keep him upright while one or other of us screened him with a blanket from the wind and the snow.

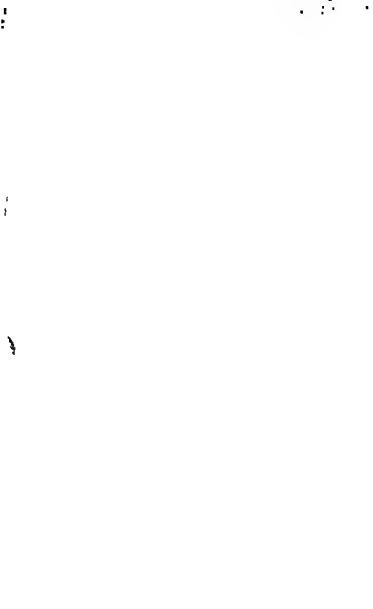
Jonnie recovered from the operation as only a dog of his tremendous physique could do, and for six months his prime was miraculously restored, but in the autumn the cancer came back, and this time it was inoperable. Morag wrote to tell me of this, and to ask my assent to his death before the pain should start and

torture to Morag, but, weighed down at the time by a bitter human loss, I lacked the courage to go north and take an active hand in things myself. Jonnie received the vet with enthusiasm, and Morag cuddled him. He . . .

wa.  
Morag had given her heart to Jonnie as she had to no other animal in her life, and for her that moment of betrayal must have been like death itself.

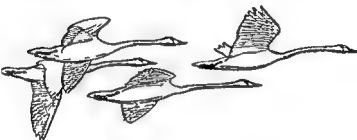
I have never had another dog since Jonnie. I have not wanted one, and shall not, perhaps, until I am of an age that would not be congenial to an active dog.





lochan's surface All through the night I heard their restless  
 . . . . . the next dark morning

calling awoke me as they gathered to take flight, and as they flew southward I watched the white pulse of their wings until I could see them no longer To me they were a symbol, for I was saying good-bye to Soay, that had been my island.



Winters at Camusfearna vary as they do elsewhere, but at their worst they are very bad indeed. When one gets up in darkness to the lashing of rain on the window-panes and the roar of the water-fall rising even above the howl of wind and tide, when the green field is scattered with wide pools that are in part floodwater but in part the overspill of waves whose spray batters the house itself, when day by day the brief hours of light are filled with dark scudding clouds and blown spindrift from the crashing shore, one begins to know the meaning of an isolation that in summer seemed no more than an empty word.

The burn fills and runs ramping high through the trunks and limbs of the alders, carrying racing masses of debris that lodge among their branches, and through the roaring of its passage come the . . . . . boulders swept

the burn was full, to braving that crazy crossing clinging to a stretched rope was the long route to Drummfiachlach by the near side of its course, more than two miles of steep ground and sodden peat bog. Since the gales tear in from the south-west, funnelling themselves between the Hebridean islands into demoniac fury, the wind is usually at one's back on the upward journey, but it is in one's face coming down and there have been nights returning from Drummfiachlach, torchless and in utter darkness, when I have taken to my hands and knees to avoid being swept away like a leaf.

There is, of course, another side to the picture, the bright log fire whose flames are reflected on the pine-panelled walls, the warmth and nursery security of that kitchen sitting-room with the steady reassuring huss of its Tilley lamps as a foreground sound to the tumult of sea and sky without, and, in the old days, Jonnie asleep conventionally on the hearth rug. But Jonnie was gone, and all too often the other pigments, as it were, for this picture were lacking too. The supply of paraffin would run out during the short dark days, candles became unobtainable within a hundred road miles, there was not space to store enough dry wood to keep the house heated. Until this year, when I installed a Calor gas stove, I cooked entirely by Primus, requiring both methylated spirits and paraffin, and when the house was without either and it would require an hour to coax a kettle to the boil over a fire of wet wood, there have been days when a kind of apathy would settle down upon me, days when I would rather creep back to bed than face the physical difficulties of life awake. When stores do arrive they have still to be lugged down the hill from Drummfiachlach, a long, stumbling journey with an un-

sea itself

Sometimes there is snow, though it rarely lies deep at Camusfeàrna itself, as the house can be no more than six feet above sea-level. But I remember one winter when it did, and it lay thick

round the house and came swirling in gustily from the sea on the morning that I had to depart for the south. I left the house before dawn to catch the mail Land Rover at Drumsfialach the dark-

was low, frozen far up its course on the snow peak and I had thought that with the aid of the rope I should be able to ford it in long seamen's thigh-boots. I saw my mistake when I reached it, but with a hundredweight or so of luggage on my back I preferred to try rather than to take the long route round through the bogs. Both my boots filled in the first couple of yards but the

far side of the burn I sat down and emptied my boots of a full

down in the water. I was not alone. I was not alone in the

a swirling, flurrying blizzard of wind and snowflakes that spun me round in unsteady pirouettes and left me dizzy and directionless.

For all the hundreds of times that I had travelled this path in

talls in the gorge. I had always been frightened of a stranger slipping down that precipice in the dark, now I was so hopelessly

on boulders hidden by the snow and the weight on my



casually to Wilfred soon after the outset of our journey, and he, as casually, had replied that I had better get one in the Tigris marshes before I came home, for there they were as common as mosquitoes, and were often tamed by the Arabs.

We spent the better part of those two months squatting cross-legged in the bottom of a *tarada* or war canoe, travelling in a leisurely, timeless way between the scattered reed-built villages of the great delta marsh both west of the Tigris and between the river and the Persian frontier, and towards the end of our journey I did acquire an otter cub.

It is difficult to find new words in which to tell of happenings that one has already described, if one has done one's best the first time one can only do worse on the second attempt, when the freshness of the image has faded, and that must be my excuse and apology for quoting here part of what I wrote of that otter cub, Chahala, soon afterwards, that and the fact that she is an integral and indispensable part of my narrative.

We were sitting after dark in a *mudhif*, or sheikh's guest house, on a mud island in the marshes, and I was brooding over the delinquency of the chatelaine, a bossy old harridan of a woman who had angered me.

I felt an unreasonable hatred for that witless woman with her show of bustle and competence, and contempt that not even her avarice had mastered her stupidity. Thinking of these things, I was not trying to understand the conversation around me when the words "*celb mai*" caught my ear. "What was that about otters?" I asked Thesiger.

"I think we've got you that otter cub you said you wanted. This fellow comes from that village half a mile away, he says he's had one for about ten days. Very small and sucks milk from a bottle. Do you want it?"

The otter's owner said he would fetch it and be back in half an hour or so. He got up and went out, through the entrance of the *mudhif* I could see his canoe glide away silently over the star-reflecting water.

Presently he returned carrying the cub, came across into the firelight and put it down on my knee as I sat cross-legged. It





called her Chahala after the river we had left the day before, and because those syllables were the nearest one could write to the sound of her sleeping cry

'I slept fitfully that night, all the pi-dogs of Dibin seemed to bark at my ears and I dared not in any case let myself fall into too sound a sleep lest I should crush Chahala, who now snuggled in my armpit. Like all otters, she was 'house trained' from the beginning and I had made things easy for her by laying my sleeping bag against the wall of the *mudhif* so that she could step

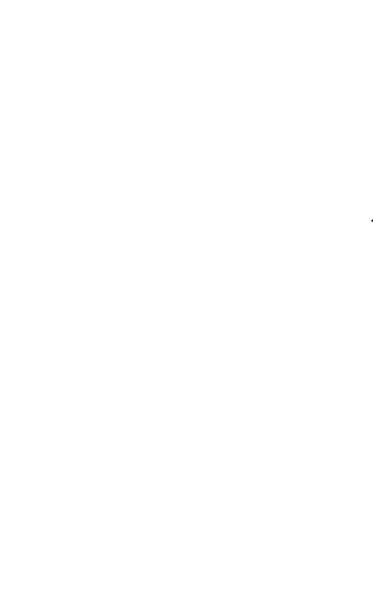
centration, a tiny yellow caterpillar of excrement. Having inspected this with evident satisfaction of a job well done she would clamber up my shoulder and chatter gently for her bottle. Thus she preferred to drink lying on her back and holding the bottle between her paws as do bear cubs and when she had finished sucking she would fall sound asleep with the teat still in her mouth and a beatific expression on her baby face.

'She accepted me as her parent from the moment that she first fell asleep in my pullover, and never once did she show fear of

her mother and  
Meanwhile this tragedy, so small but so complete threw no shadow on her brief life, and as the days went by she learned to know her name and

Arabs called her my daughter, and used to ask me when I had last given her suck.

I soon found that she was restrictive of movement and activity. Carried habitually inside my pullover, she made



looking up at me pathetically, and when I picked her up again she instantly sought the warm darkness inside my pullover.

"We made an hour's journey through flower-choked waterways in low green marsh, and stopped at another big island village. It was plain to me when we landed that Chahala was dying. She was weak but restless, and inside the house she sought

the dark, warm, and comfortable place where she had  
 . . .  
 . . .  
 . . .

hours when Thesiger came in from doctoring. "Better get out for a bit," he said. "I'll keep an eye on her. It's hell for you sitting in here all the time, and you can't do her any good. This is your last marsh village, and you may never see another."

I went out, and remembered things that I had wanted to photograph and always postponed. Then I found that the shutter of my camera was broken, and I went back into the house.

"We left an hour later. When I felt the warmth of Chahala next to my shirt again I felt a moment's spurious comfort that she would live, but she would not stay there. She climbed out with a strength that surprised me, and stretched herself restlessly on the

as she slept, and a few seconds after that I saw a shiver run through her body. I put my hand on her and felt the strange rigidity that comes in the instant following death, then she became limp under my touch.

"She's dead," I said. I said it in Arabic, so that the boys would stop paddling.

Thesiger said, "Are you sure?" and the boys stared unbelievably. "Quite dead?" they asked it again and again. I handed her to Thesiger, the body drooped from his hands like a miniature fur stole. "Yes," he said, "she's dead." He threw the

"Come on," said Thesiger "Ru-hu-Ru-hu!" but the boys sat motionless, staring at the small corpse and at me, and Thesiger grew angry with them before they would move. Amara kept on looking back from the bows until at last we rounded the corner of a green reed-bed and she was out of sight.

The sun shone on the white flowers, the blue kingfishers glinted low over them and the eagles wheeled overhead on the blue sky, but all of these seemed less living for me than Chahala was dead. I told myself that she was only one of thousands like her in these marshes, that are speared with the five-pointed trident, or shot, or taken as cubs to die slowly in more callous captivity, but she was dead and I was desolate. The fault lay with whoever

motives that in me were conscious.

I fretted miserably over the death of Chahala, for she had convinced me utterly that it was an otter that I wanted as an animal companion at Camusfearna, and I felt that I had had my chance and wasted it. It was not until long afterwards that the probable cause of her death struck me. The Marsh Arabs drug fish with digitalis concealed in shrimp bait, and whereas the human system, or that of an adult Buff-backed Heron, might find the minute dose innocuous, the same quantity might be fatal to as young a creature as Chahala.

I had no more time in the marshes, Wilfred and I were to spend a few days in Basra before going on to pass the early summer among the pastoral tribes. But Chahala's death, which seemed to me like an end, was in fact a beginning

PART II

*Living with Otters*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

THE night that Chahala died we reached Al Azair, Ezra's tomb, on the Tigris. From there Wilfred Thesiger and I were both going to Basra to collect and answer our mail from Europe before setting off together again. At the Consulate-General at Basra we found that Wilfred's mail had arrived but that mine had not.

"I cabled to England, and when, three days later, nothing had happened, I tried to telephone. The call had to be booked twenty-four hours in advance."

"The second the exchange was as an-Nebi's

*mudhi* in a week's time, and he left.

"Two days before the date of our rendezvous I returned to the Consulate-General late in the afternoon, after several hours' absence, to find that my mail had arrived. I carried it to my bedroom to read, and there squatting on the floor were two Marsh Arabs, beside them lay a sack that squirmed from time to time.

"They handed me a note from Thesiger: 'Here is your otter, a male and weaned. I feel you may want to take it to London—it would be a handful in the *tarada*.' It is the one I originally heard

With the opening of that sack began a phase of my life that in the essential sense has not yet ended and may, for all I know, not end before I do. It is, in effect, a thralldom to otters: an obsession, that I have since found to be shared by most of the people who have ever owned one.



The creature that emerged, not greatly disconcerted, from this sack on to the spacious tiled floor of the Consulate bedroom did

armour, between whose tips was visible a soft velvet fur like that of a chocolate-brown mole. He shook himself, and I half expected this aggressive camouflage to disintegrate into a cloud of dust, but it remained unaffected by his manoeuvre, and in fact it was not for another month that I contrived to remove the last of it and see him as it were in his true colours.

Yet even on that first day I recognized that he was an otter of a species that I had never seen in the flesh, resembling only a curious otter skin that I had bought from the Arabs in one of the marsh villages. Mijbil as I called the new otter after a sheikh with whom we had recently been staying and whose name had

circumstance, perhaps influenced on my side the intensity of the emotional relationship between us for I became, during a year of his constant and violently affectionate companionship, fonder of him than of almost any human being, and to write of him in the past tense makes me feel as desolate as one who has lost an only child. For a year and five days he was about my bed now have there will

For the first twenty-four hours he was in the water

such portions of him as are inedible to humans. The Consul

General sent out a servant to buy fish, but the servant's return coincided with a visit from Robert Angorly, a British-educated Christian Iraqi who was the Crown Prince's game warden and entertained a passionate interest in natural history. Angorly told me that now

an

ha

da

supply of fish that had been taken with nets, and thereafter he brought every day half a dozen or so small reddish fish from the Tigris

betwee

stick of

hand side of the jaw alternating with five crunches on the right

and had invited me to a day's duck shooting on the Crown Prince's fabulous marshes, an experience that nobody can ever have again, for now the hated Crown Prince is as dead as only a mob gone berserk could make him, and of my friend Angorly, whom I cannot believe ever to have taken much interest in anything political, there has been no word since the revolution.

Of the duck shoot my most enduring memory is of a great

ever killed many from that butt he was a better man than I. It stood quite alone in a great waste of unbroken water that stretched away for a mile or more in all directions, its sides were no more than waist high and in the centre of it was a wooden

two hundred yards. I was the cynosure of every bird's



him, and, within it, a high-netted tennis court. In this enclosure I established after a few days that he would follow me without a lead and come to me when I called his name. By the end of a week he had accepted me as a friend.

Usually play after they are adult, they are concerned with eating, sleeping, or procreating, or with the means to one or other of these ends. But otters are one of the few exceptions to this rule, right through their lives they spend much of their time in play that does not even require a partner. In the wild state they will play alone for hours with any convenient floating object in the water, pulling it down to let it bob up again, or throwing it with a jerk of the head so that it lands with a splash and becomes a quarry to be pursued. No doubt in their holts they lie on their backs and play, too, as my otters have, with small objects that they can roll between their paws and pass from palm to palm, for at Camusfearna all the sea holts contain a profusion of small shells and round stones that can only have

neck, to a surprising height and distance. These games he would play either by himself or with me, but the really steady play of an otter, the time-filling play both of a sense of well-being and a full stomach, seems to me to be when the otter lies on its back and juggles with small objects between its paws. Thus they do with an extraordinarily concentrated absorption and dexterity, as though a conjurer were trying to perfect some trick, as though in the presence of a man observer could not

with forepaws upstretched, rolling them between and, minutes on end.



unpostponable prospect of transporting Mij to England, and to his ultimate destination, Camusfearna B O A.C. would not fly livestock at all, and there was then no other line to London. Finally I booked a Trans-World flight to Paris, with a doubtful Air France booking on the same evening to London. Trans-World insisted that Mij should be packed into a box of not more than eighteen inches square, and that this box must be personal luggage, to be carried on the floor at my feet

Mij had . . . perhaps a little over a foot long

acquaintance. The box was delivered on the afternoon before my departure on a 9 15 p.m. flight. It was zinc-lined, and divided into two compartments, one for sleeping and one for the relief of nature, and it appeared to my inexperienced eye as nearly ideal as could be contrived.

Dinner was at eight, and I thought that it would be as well to put Mij into the box an hour before we left, so that he would become accustomed to it before the jolting of the journey began to upset him. I manoeuvred him into it, not without difficulty, and he seemed peaceful when I left him in the dark for a hurried meal.

But when I returned, with only barely time for the Consulate car to reach the airport for the flight, I was confronted with an appalling spectacle. There was complete silence from inside the box, but from its airholes and the chunks around the hinged lid, blood had trickled and dried on the white wood. I whipped off the padlock and tore open the lid, and Mij, exhausted and blood-

on the . . . and tried to climb on my leg. He had torn . . . and his . . . walls . . . f it, so . . . that there were no cutting edges left, it was just ten minutes until . . . It

myself to do it, slamming the lid down on my fingers as I closed it before he could make his escape. Then began a journey the like of which I hope I shall never know again.

I sat in the back of the car with the box beside me as the Arab driver tore through the streets of Basra like a ricocheting bullet. Donkeys reared, bicycles swerved wildly, out in the suburbs

Exactly as we drew to a screeching stop before the airport entrance I heard a splintering sound from the box beside me, and saw Mij's nose force up the lid. He had summoned all the strength in his small body and torn one of the hinges clean out of the wood.

a screwdriver purloined from the driver, to force back the screws into the splintered wood. But I knew that it could be no more than a temporary measure at best, and my imagination boggled at the thought of the next twenty-four hours.

It was perhaps my only stroke of fortune that the seat booked for me was at the extreme front of the aircraft, so that I had a bulkhead before me instead of another seat. The other passengers, a remarkable cross-section of the orient and occident, stared curiously as they crowded into the narrow aisle with a horrified expression for just a moment before they fastened their seatbelts. I saw her to be an elegant woman in early middle age. She showed no sympathy or tolerance for the man that would so soon and so inevitably be in her midst. At that moment the lid held, and as I sat down and fastened my safety belt there seemed to be a temporary silence from within.

The port engines roared, and then the starboard and the aircraft

... and returned to the room after her neighbours and then

over the great marshes that had been Mij's home, and peering downward into the dark I could see the glint of their waters beneath the moon.

... of old neighbours and a parcel

in a cool place I have retained the most profound admiration for that air hostess, and in subsequent sieges and skirmishes with

events of the last half hour together with the prospect of the next twenty-

I was no

ewel case

with her

she then

enquired, to have my pet on my knee? The animal would surely feel happier there, and my neighbour had no objection. I could have kissed her hand in the depth of my gratitude. But, not knowing others, I was quite unprepared for what followed.

I unlocked the padlock and opened the lid, and Mij was out like a flash. He dodged my fumbling hands with an eel-like wriggle and disappeared at high speed down the fuselage of the aircraft. As I tried to get into the gangway I could follow his

... wave of disturbance amongst

... through a  
... apping of  
travelling-coats, and half-way down the ... man stood  
up on her seat screaming out, 'A rat! A rat!' Then the  
hostess reached her, and within a matter of seconds



Mij's tail disappearing beneath the legs of a portly white-turbaned Indian, I tried a flying tackle, landing flat on my face. I missed Mij's tail, but found myself grasping the sandalled foot of the Indian's female companion, furthermore my face was inexplicably covered in curry. I staggered up babbling inarticulate apology, and the Indian gave me a long silent stare, so utterly expressionless that even in my hypersensitive mood I could not, as, however, glad to have had won over the others, were regarding me

now as a harmless clown rather than as a dangerous lunatic. The air hostess stepped into the breach once more.

'Perhaps,' she said with the most charming smile, 'it would be better if you resumed your seat, and I will find the animal and bring it to you.' She would probably have said the same had Mij been an escaped rogue elephant. I explained that Mij, being lost and frightened, might bite a stranger, but she did not think so. I returned to my seat.

I heard the ripple of flight and pursuit passing up and down the body of the aircraft behind me, but I could see little. I was craning my neck back as each

Two the only possible thing to be found, and in that first spontaneous return was sown the seed of the absolute trust that he accorded me for the rest of his life

Otters are extremely bad at doing nothing. That is to say that they have no will, the

land waste. There is, I am convinced, something positively provoking to an otter about order and tidiness in any form, and the greater the state of confusion that they can create about them the more contented they feel. A room is not properly habitable to them until they have turned everything upside down, cushions must be thrown to the floor from sofas and armchairs, books pulled out of bookcases, wastepaper baskets overturned and the rubbish spread as widely as possible, drawers opened and con-

... he has believed to be hidden ...  
... isacked

This aspect of an otter's behaviour is certainly due in part to an ...  
... use  
... of  
... or  
beyond any man-made obstruction. This, combined with an uncanny mechanical sense of how to get things open—a sense, ...  
... much safer

was to learn.

We had been flying for perhaps five hours, and must, I thought, be nearing Cairo, when one of these moods descended upon Mijbil. It opened comparatively innocuously, with an assault upon the newspapers spread carefully round my feet, and in a minute or two the place looked like a street upon which ...  
has been given a tacker-tape welcome. Then he  
attentions to the box, where his sleeping compartment

... he came and he ... he ... the head and shoulders in

pedalling motion to hoist out the remainder. I was doing my best to cope with the litter, but it was like a ship's pumps working

him pause for no more than seconds, by chance, in all likelihood

somehow I hoped that she might leave the aircraft at Cairo before the outrage was discovered and to my infinite relief she did so. I was still grappling with Mij when the instruction lights came on as we circled the city, and then we were down on the tarmac with forty minutes to wait.

... he gave no sign of noticing them at all. He trotted along at my side, stopping as a dog does to investigate small smells in the grass and when I went into the refreshment room for a drink he sat down at my feet as if this were the only life to which he was accustomed.

On our way back to the aircraft an Egyptian official hazarded the first of the many guesses as to his identity that I was to hear during the subsequent months. "What you got there?" he asked. "An crime?"

My troubles really began at Paris, an interminable time later. Mij had slept from time to time, but I had not closed an eye, and

putting him back into his box. In its present form, however, the box was useless for one hinge was dangling unattached from the lid.

saying that one of the crew would come and nail down the box and rope it for me. She warned me at the same time that Air France's regulations differed from those of Trans-World, and that from Paris onward the box would have to travel freight and

prison and listen to his pathetic cries as he was nailed up in what

and the exact causes have yet to be determined. Personally I do not question that it is closely akin to the 'voluntary dying' of which Africans have long been reputed to be capable, life has become no longer tolerable and the animal chooses quite unconsciously no doubt to die. It was travel shock that I was afraid might kill Mijbul inside that box, which to him represented a circumstance more terrible than any he had experienced, and I would be unable even to give him the reassuring smell of my hand through the breathing-holes.

We disembarked in torrential rain that formed puddles and lakes all over the tarmac and had reduced my thin, semi-tropical suit to a sodden pulp before even I had entered the bus that was to take me and the three other London-bound passengers across Paris to Orly Airport. I clung to the unwieldy box all this time in the hope of reducing Mij's unavoidable period of despair after I became separated from it, together with the personal impedimenta that I could not well lose sight of it rendered

movement almost impossible, and I felt near to voluntary death myself

appeared into the darkness on a luggage transporter.

When we arrived at Amsterdam instead of London the com-

have a very clear idea of what had happened to any of the luggage belonging to the four London-bound passengers. A helpful official suggested that it might still be in Paris, as it must be clearly labelled London and not Amsterdam.

throughout the world. The official was under crossfire, for at my elbow an American business man was also threatening legal action. When the shundy was at its height another official arrived and said calmly that our luggage was now aboard a B.E.A. plane due for take-off in seven minutes, and would we kindly take our seats in the bus.

We deflated slowly. Muttering, 'I guess I'm going to cast my personal eyes on that baggage before I get air-borne again. They can't make a displaced person out of me', my American companion spoke for all of us waifs. So we cast our personal eyes into the freight compartment, and there was Mij's box, quite silent in a corner.

It was the small hours of the morning when we reached London Airport. I had cabled London from Amsterdam, and there was a hired car to meet me, but there was one more contretemps before I reached the haven of my flat. In all my travels I have

never, but for that once, been required by the British Customs to open a single bag or tin. —

I was, for whichever reason, so tired that I could hardly stand, and to the proffered *pro forma* and the question, 'Have you read this?' I replied, with extreme testiness and foolishness 'Yes—hundreds of times'

'And you have nothing to declare?'

'Nothing'

'How long have you been out of this country?'

'About three months'

'And during that time—'

pr. (This corner skins a  
Ma .. y the Beni  
Lar ..

He seemed momentarily at a loss but he had retired only *pour mieux sauter*. The attack, when it came, was utterly unexpected.

'Where did you get that watch?'

I could have kicked myself. Two days before, when playing water games with Mijbil in the bath I had forgotten to screw in the winding handle of my Rolex Oyster and it had, not unnaturally, stopped. I had gone into Basra and bought for twelve shillings and sixpence, an outrageous time-piece that made a noise like castanets. It had stopped twice unprovoked, during the journey.

I explained, but I had already lost face. I produced my own watch from a pocket, and added that I should be grateful if he would confiscate the replacement forthwith.

'It is not a question of confiscation,' he said, 'there is a fine for failing to declare dutiable goods. And now may I please examine that Rolex?'

It took another quarter of an hour to persuade him that the Rolex was not contraband, then he began to search my luggage. No corner was left unexplored, Mijbil himself could not do better, and when he had finished none of the

close. Then he turned to the last item on my list, one live otter. He pondered this in silence for perhaps a minute. Then, "You have with you a live otter?" I said that I very much doubted whether it was still alive, but that it had been when at Paris.

"If the animal is dead there will be no duty payable on the uncured skin, if it is alive it is, of course, subject to the quarantine regulations."

I had taken the trouble to check this point before leaving Iraq and at last I was on firm ground. I told him that I knew there to

valuable animal

the waiting car and we were on the last lap of the journey. What meant still more to me was that from the box there now came a faint enquiring chitter and a rustle of wood shavings.

Miybil had in fact displayed a characteristic shared, I believe,

almost, as a voluntary act independent of exhaustion; it is an escape mechanism that comes into operation when the animal's inventiveness in the face of adversity has failed to ameliorate its circumstances. I have seen it very occasionally in trapped animals, an arctic fox in Finmark, captive by the leg for no more than an hour, a badger in a Surrey wood, a common house mouse in a box trap. It is, of course, almost a norm, too, of animals kept in

ball and banish entirely the distasteful world about him.

On that first day that he arrived in England he had, I think, been in just such a barricaded state ever since the lid of the box

back for all one may

respiration and the forebrain rested in a state bordering upon catalepsy.

He was wide awake once more by the time we reached my flat, and when I had the driver paid off and the door closed behind me I felt a moment of deep emotional satisfaction, almost of triumph, that I had after all brought back a live otter cub from Iraq to London, and that Camusfearna was less than six hundred miles distant from me.

clambered out into





hanging from the ceiling and the electric light wires were enclosed in tunnels of hardboard that gave the place the appearance of a power-house.

All these precautions were entirely necessary, for if Mij thought that he had been excluded for too long, more especially from visitors whose acquaintance he wished to make, he would set about laying waste with extraordinary invention. No amount of forethought that I could muster was ever able to forestall his

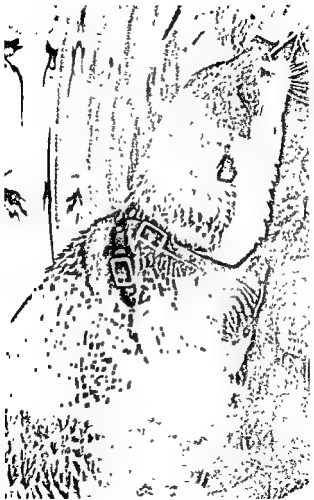
was more convenient than treatment

One even no far as make for the

mature At various points along the length of this railing were suspended certain decorative objects, a Cretan shepherd's bag a dagger, and other things whose identity now eludes me. Purposefully, and with an air of enormous self-satisfaction, Mij began to chew through the cords from which these objects d art of

can't go on?

More usually, however, when he was loose in the studio, he would play for hours at a time with what soon became an estab-







The press on one of  
the island beaches







lished selection of toys, ping-pong balls, marbles, india-rubber fruit, and a terrapin shell that I had brought back from his native marshes. The smaller among these objects he became adept at throwing right on the mark with a flick of his head and with

journey home, so that the lid, when closed, remained at a slope from one end to the other. My discovery was that if he placed the ball on the high end it would run down the length of the suitcase unaided. He would dash round to the other end to ambush its arrival, hide from it, crouching, to spring up and take it by surprise as it reached the drop to the floor, grab it and trot off with it to the high end once more.



certain streets and certain corners at which dogs of all sorts and sizes had left stimulating messages, messages that were perhaps the more fascinating for being as it were in a foreign language. Whether or not he could decipher their purport whether or not they conjured up for him the various erotic, impudent or pugnacious images intended he would spend minutes at a time stuffing these clearing-houses of local canine information, and would occasionally add to them some liquid comment of his own, tantalizingly cryptic no doubt to the next comer.

I was too timid of the result to allow him to meet any dog so to speak nose to nose and I would pick him up if we met unattended dogs in the street but for his part he seemed largely indifferent to them. The only time that I was conscious of some mutual recognition taking place some awareness of similarity between canine and lutrine values was one morning when

... he darted from a new toy, ... was too ... it from one side of his jaws like a gigantic gum boil and thus encumbered he set off briskly up the street tugging at his lead. Rounding the first street corner we came face to face with a very fat spaniel, unattended and sedately carrying in its mouth a bundle of newspapers. The respective loads of otter and dog made it difficult for either of them to turn its head far as they came abreast, ... wild ... er both ... y some

momentary mental revelation.

Mij quickly developed certain compulsive habits on these walks in the London streets akin, clearly to the rituals of children who on their way to and from school must place their feet

... primary school, along whose frontage ran a low wall some two feet high separating a corridor-width strip of garden from road. On his way home, but never on his way out Mij



tug me in the direction of this wall, jump up on it, and gallop the full length of its thirty yards, to the hopeless distraction both

grilles through which he would peer motionless for long seconds before he could be led away from them. On return to the flat he would scrabble frantically to be let in, and the moment his lead was unhitched he would roll on his back and squirm with eye-bewildering speed and vigour before returning to his toys.

Many of his actions indeed appeared ritual, and I think that comparatively few people who keep wild creatures realize the enormous security-value of routine in the maintenance of an animal's contentment. As soon as routine is broken a new element enters, in however minute and unrecognizable a trace—the fear of the unknown which is basic to the behaviour of all animals including man. Every living creature exists by a routine of some kind, the small rituals of that routine are the landmarks, the boundaries of security the reassuring walls that exclude a *horror vacui*, thus, in our own species after some tempest of the spirit in which the landmarks seem to have been swept away, a man will reach out tentatively in mental darkness to feel the walls, to

landmarks are of even greater importance, for once removed from its natural surroundings its ecological norm, comparatively little of what the senses perceive can be comprehended in function or potentiality, and the true conditions for insecurity are already. . . .  
 may  
 health  
 nately  
 in their charges, child or animal as a means to an end.

It was about this time that Mij delivered his first serious intentional bite. He was fed now upon live eels—which I had

learned to be the staple food of many races of otter—supplemented by a mixture of raw egg and unpolished rice, a sticky

obstreperous, to shut him in with a full bath of water and three or four eels. On this occasion I had closed the bathroom door imperfectly and the eel had slipped out and was eating it up and the

to try to take away from a wild animal its natural prey, but when after a few mouthfuls he decided to carry it upstairs to the gallery I determined to call a halt, visualizing a soaking and eel-slimed bed. I put on three pairs of gloves, the outermost being a pair of heavily-padded flying gauntlets. I caught up with him half-way up the

med a wail him, telling him that he couldn't possibly hurt me and that I was going to take the eel back to the bathroom. The humming became much louder. I bent down and put my heavily-gloved hand upon the eel. He screamed at me, but still he took no action. Then

let go almost in the same instant, and rolled on his back squirming

and apparent solicitude

There were two small bones broken in my hand, and for a week it was the size of a boxing glove, very painful, and an acute embarrassment to me in the presence of those who from the first had been sceptical of Miy's domesticity. I had been given a sharp and necessary reminder that though he might carry



inaccuracy on the part of the speaker, putting the blame, as it were for the creature's unfamiliarity squarely on my own shoulders, hinting or doing more than hint, that someone had blundered, that the hand of the potter had shaken, containing, too an accusation of unfinished work unfit for exhibition—came from a Herculean labourer engaged, mightily and alone, upon digging a hole in the earth. . . .  
 he laid down his pick,

As I drew near  
 quality, one of surprise, certainly, but also of affront, as though he would have me know that he was not one upon whom to play jokes. I came abreast of him, he spat glared, and then growled out, "Ere, mister—*what is that supposed to be?*"

It was, I think, his question more than any other that reminded me of my own ignorance, I did not, in fact, know what *Mij* was supposed to be. I knew, certainly, that he was an otter, but I also knew that he must be one of a species which if known to the scientific world, was at least not known to live in the delta marshes of the Tigris and Euphrates, for the scant zoological literature that had accompanied me to Iraq made it plain that the only known otter of the Mesopotamian marshes was the Persian sub-species of the common European otter, *Lutra lutra* Chahala, the cub that had died, had clearly belonged to that race, she had longer fur with 'guard hairs' in place of *Mij*'s sleek, darker velvet, she was lighter on her throat and belly than upon her back, whereas *Mij*'s body seemed to have been slipped into an evenly-dyed plush bag, the under side of her tail was not, as was *Mij*'s, flat like a ruler.

In a village of the marshes between the Tigris and the Persian frontier I had bought two otter skins from the householder with

fur was short and shiny and the colour of milkless





*Mjbil in a glass tank.*  
*Drawings by Michael Ayrtom*



man suggested that the new otter should bear my name, I

ever perilously, the halo of a creator. ( Can I have it for my own. we used to ask when we were small 'For my very own?' Here, surely, was an animal of my very own, to bear my name, every animal that looked like it would always bear my name for ever and ever, unless some odious taxonomist of the future, some leveller, some jealous, dusty scribe of the backroom and the skeletons, were to plot against me and plan the destruction of my tiny, living memorial )

So Mij and all his race became *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*, and though he is now no more, and there is no ostensible proof that there is another living specimen in the world, I had realized a far-off childish fantasy, and there was a Maxwell's otter.





## CHAPTER NINE

IT was now early May, and I had been in London for more than three weeks, three weeks of impatience and nostalgia for Camusfearna, and I felt I could wait no longer to see Mij playing, as I visualized him, under the waterfall, or free about the burn and the island beaches. I went by way of my family home in the south of Scotland, where Mij could taste a partial but guarded liberty before emancipation to total freedom in the north.

Travelling with otters is a very expensive business. There was now no question of again confining Mij to a box, and there is,

travelled with me in a first-class sleeper, a form of transport which for some reason he enjoyed hugely, indeed from the very first he showed a perverse predilection for railway stations, and a total disregard for their deafening din and alarming crowd scenes.

At the barrier the railway official punched for me a dog ticket (on which I had noticed the words 'Give full Description') and had already turned to the next in the queue before his eyes widened in a perfect double take, then Mij was tugging up the crowded platform at the end of his lead, heedless of the shouts and the bustle, the screaming train hooters and rumbling luggage trolleys.

I had planned this operation with some care, visualizing each hazard and circumventing it as far as possible in advance, my hush money was already paid, the basket I carried contained everything conceivably necessary to Mij for the journey, over my left arm was an army blanket ready to protect the sheets from Mij's platform-grimed paws as soon as he entered the sleeper. When the initial penetration of the citadel, as it were, passed off

without the slightest hutch, I felt that I had reaped no more than the just rewards of my forethought.

Mij had an instant eye for anything connected with water, and the most cursory inspection of the sleeping compartment convinced him that in the wash basin, however dry at the moment, lay the greatest pleasure-potential. he curled up in it his form fitting its contours as an apple fits a dumpling and his paws began increasingly feverish experiments with the chromium tap. It was however, of a type entirely new to him operating by downward pressure, and not a drop could he draw from it for a full five minutes, at last, trying to lever himself into an upright position, he put his full weight on the tap handle and found himself, literally, in his element.

There was only one incident that evening an incident, however, that for a moment bade fair to bring the whole train to a stop and to expose to the outraged eyes of officialdom my irregular travelling companion. My attention had wandered from Mij, the train was roaring up through the Midlands in summer dusk, and I was watching out of the window the green corn and the blackthorn hedges and the tall trees heavy with leaf, and thinking how effectively the glass and the movement of the train insulated one from any intimacy with these desirable things while seeming to offer no protection against the impact of drab industrial landscapes. Thus occupied it had not occurred to me that Mij could in that very confined space, get into any serious mischief, it had not crossed my mind for example that by standing on the piled luggage he could reach the communication cord. This, however, was precisely what he had done, and when my eye lit on him he already had it firmly between his teeth while exploring with his paws the tunnel into which its ends disappeared. It was probably nothing but this insatiable curiosity as to detail that had so far saved the situation, now as I

seemed the determination I caught him round the shoulders, but he retained his grip and as I pulled him I saw the chain

for such occasions and he began to squirm. Later that evening he tried several times to reach the cord again, but by then I had redispersed the suitcases and it was beyond the furthest stretch of his elastic body.

It was in unfamiliar surroundings such as these that Mij

outside the bedclothes. He was still so disposed when the dant brought my tea in the morning. He stared at Mij, and 'Was it tea for one, or two, sir?'

During his stay at Monreith, the home of my family, Mij's character began to emerge and to establish itself. At first on farm mull dams then in the big loch over which the house looks out, and finally in the sea—which though he had never known salt water, he entered without apparent surprise—he demonstrated not only his astonishing

experience, I allowed him to swim only on the end of a long fishing line. I had bought a spring reel, which automatically took up the slack, and attached this to the butt end of a salmon rod, but the danger of underwater snags on which the line might loop itself soon seemed too great, and after the first week he ran free and swam free. He wore a harness to which a lead could be attached in emergency, but its function was as much to proclaim his domesticity to would-be human aggressors as one of restraint.

The design of this harness, one that would neither impede movement nor catch upon submerged branches and drown him, was a subject that occupied my imagination for many months, and was not perfected for nearly a year.

This time of getting to know a wild animal on terms as it were, of mutual esteem, was wholly fascinating to me, and our long daily walks by stream and hedgerow, moorland and loch, were a source of perpetual delight. Though it remained difficult to lure him from some enticing piece of open water, he was otherwise no more trouble than a dog and infinitely more interesting to watch. His hunting powers were still undeveloped, but he would sometimes corner an eel in the mill dams, and in the streams he would catch frogs, which he skinned with a dexterity seemingly born of long practice. I had rightly guessed that his early life in a Marsh Arab household would have produced an enlightened and progressive attitude towards poultry—for no Ma'dan would tolerate a predator among the sparse and scrawny scarecrows that pass in the marshes for chickens—and in fact I found that Mij would follow me through a crowded and cackling farmyard without a glance to right or to left. To most domestic livestock he was indifferent, but black cattle he clearly identified with the water buffaloes of his home, and if they gathered at the edge of water in which he was swimming he became wild with excitement, plunging and porpoising and chattering with pleasure.

twelve-bore cartridge case, and the woman's comb with an artificial brilliant set in the bar, thus he discovered at the side of the drive as we set off one morning, and carried it for three hours, laying it down on the bank when

as soon as he emerged.  
 slightest interest.  
 essed preference, I  
 s instinct into  
 found myself almost imperceptibly  
 world in which the otters of my own countryside lived, a

world of deep-cut streams between high, rooty banks where the leaves of the undergrowth met overhead, of unguessed alleys and tunnels in reedbeds by a loch's edge, of mossy culverts and marsh-marigolds, of islands tangled with fallen trees among whose roots were earthy excavations and a whisper of the wind in the willows

tobogganing, a hollowed-out rotten tree-stump whose interior had been formed into a dry sleeping place, the print of a broad, capable, webbed foot, a small tarry dropping, composed mainly of eel-bones, deposited upon a stone in midstream. In these last I had expected Mij to show at least an equal interest to that which he had displayed in their canine counterparts, but whether because otters do not use their excreta in an anecdotal or informative way, or because he did not recognize in these the product of his own kind, he treated them as if they did not exist.

blooded animals. On this occasion he was swimming in a reedy

swimming—for an otter swimming under-water uses its forelimbs very little—and here he placed the chuck while he went on in a leisurely way with his underwater exploration. It must have drowned during the first minute or so, and when at length he

inertia, he left it where it lay and went in search of something more co-operative.

In the library at Monreith I explored what natural historians of earlier generations had to say about otters. There were no recent works, for the relevant section of the library had received no addition for many years past. That garrulous eighteenth-century down the Comte de Buffon, whose nineteen volumes had

whimsical man, much concerned with the curious, and curious as to the existence of most patently improbable creatures, which he himself tried assiduously to produce by arranging  
 ... he was disappointedly  
 ... could copulate  
 ... he appeared to  
 attach some mystic significance to whether an animal could or could not be persuaded to eat honey. Otters, he found, could not.

"Young animals are generally beautiful, but the young otter is not so handsome as the old. A head ill shaped, ears placed low, eyes small and covered, a lurid aspect, awkward motions, an

... of mechanical cry, which  
 The  
 ... ast, to  
 h with  
 regard to sentiment and instinct, are much inferior to other animals. But I can hardly allow him to have the talents of the beaver. All I know is, that the otters dig no habitations for themselves, that they often change their places of abode, that they banish their young at the end of six weeks or two months, that those I attempted to tame endeavoured to bite, that some days after they became more gentle, perhaps because they were weak or sick, that, so far from being easily accustomed to a domestic life all of them that I attempted to bring up, died young, that the otter is naturally of a cruel and savage disposition. His retreats exhale a noxious odour from the remains of putrid fishes, and his own body has a bad smell. The flesh is extremely fishy and disagreeable. The Romish Ch

permits the use of it on maigre days. In the kitchen of the Carthusian convent, near Dijon Mr Pennant saw one preparing for the dinner of the religious of the rigid order who by their rules, are prohibited during their whole lives the eating of flesh.

The description might perhaps be a more and somewhat detailed one.

American naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton was certainly champion in chief. Writing soon after the turn of this century he said 'Of all the beasts whose lives I have tried to tell there is one that stands forth the Chevalier Bayard of the wilds—without fear and without reproach. That is the otter the joyful, keen and

the noblest little soul that ever went four-footed through the woods.'<sup>1</sup> 'I knew, 'the  
to re and its  
the otter

writing of the tobogganing habit. It is a delightful proof of growth and uplift when we find an adult animal setting aside a portion of its time and effort for amusement and especially for social amusement. A large number of the noblest animals thus relax from sordid life and pursue amusement with time and appliances after a fashion that finds its highest development in man.

Yet another early writer whose name I find elusive, remarked with a certain quaint charm in choice of words that 'the Otter is of course a giant amphibious stoat whose nature has been softened by the gentling and ennobling influence of the fisher life'.

<sup>1</sup> *Life Histories of Northern Animals* (Constable, 1910)

We arrived at Camusfearna in early June, soon after the

it is Midsummer's day, as though to ward off the logical deduction that summer has not yet begun.

When I think of early summer at Camusfearna a single

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of  
a  
th.  
against the  
stain of sun  
about the b  
the heather  
contrast, for the eye may move from them to the sea beyond  
them only through the intermediary, as it were, of the varying  
greens among which they grow. It is in June and October that

orderly strata of seaweed species are set against glaring, vibrant  
whites of barnacle-covered rock and shell sand, with always  
beyond them the elusive, changing blues and purples of the  
moving water, and somewhere in the foreground the wild  
roses of the north.

Into this bright, watery landscape my moved and took  
possession with a delight that communicated itself as clearly as  
any articulate speech could have done, his alien but essen-  
appropriate entity occupied and dominated every corner



that he became for me the central figure among the host of wild creatures with which I was surrounded. The waterfall, the burn, the familiar

forethought that had so far gone to his tending, Mij's daily life followed something of a routine, this became, as the weeks went on, relaxed into a total freedom at the centre point of which Camusfàrna house remained Mij'sholt, the den to which he returned at night, and in the daytime when he was tired. But this emancipation, like most natural changes, took place so gradually and unobtrusively that it was difficult for me to say at what point the routine had ceased.

at my knees) and would wake with him at about half past eight in the morning. I have no explanation for this, and so I am left with the fact that it was actually I who made the first unconscious movement, giving him the cue which he could not be altogether disengaged from whatever the

tucked the bedclothes from beneath the sides of the mattress, thus achieved he would redouble his efforts at the foot of the bed, where the sheets and blankets had a firmer hold. When everything had been loosened up to his satisfaction he would flow off the bed on to the floor—except when running on dry land the only appropriate word for an otter's movement is flowing, they pour themselves, as it were, in the direction of their objective—take the bedclothes between his teeth, and, with a series of violent

will execute a series of mighty hunches of his arched back, each of them lifting my head and whole shoulders clear of the bed, and at some point in the procedure he invariably contrived to dislodge the pillows while I was still in mid-air, much as a certain type of practical joker will remove a chair upon which someone is

own way in the end; they are not dogs, and they co-exist with humans rather than being owned by them

His next objective was the eel-box in the burn, followed, having breakfasted, by a tour of the water perimeter, the three-quarter circle formed by the burn and the sea, shooting like an under-water arrow after trout where the burn runs deep and slow between the trees, turning over stones for hidden eels where it spreads broad and shallow over sun-reflecting scales of mica;

col

dab

on a second lap, home to the kitchen and ecstatic squirming among his towels

This preamble to the day, when Mij had a full stomach had not, became, as he established favoured pools and f

grounds which had every morning to be combed as for a lost possession, ever longer and longer, and after the first fortnight I took, not without misgiving, to going back indoors myself as soon as he had been fed. At first he would return after an hour or so, and when he had dried himself he would creep up under the loose cover of the sofa and form a round breathing hump at the centre of the seat. But as time went on he stayed longer about the burn, and I would not begin to worry until he had been gone for half the day.

There were great quantities of cattle at Camusfearna that year, for the owner of the estate was of an experimental turn of mind, and had decided to farm cattle on the lines of the Great Glen Cattle Ranch. The majority of the cattle were of the Highland breed, and they presented too formidable an appearance for him, and after a week or two he devised for himself a means of cattle-baiting at which he became a past master. With extreme

he would advance *ventre à terre* towards the rear end of the animal, and when he was within a few feet of the hind legs he would spring forward, and with a single blow of his hand he would bring the animal down on its knees. As a useful by-product of this method of baiting, the owner of the estate found that the cattle were much more docile than those of the Great Glen Ranch.

ward exactly in time to dodge the lashing hooves. At first I viewed this sport with the gravest alarm for, owing to the structure of the skull a comparatively light blow on the nose can kill an otter, but Mij was able to gauge the distance to an inch, and never a hoof so much as grazed him. As a useful by-product of this method of baiting, the owner of the estate found that the cattle were much more docile than those of the Great Glen Ranch.

I had a book to write during those summer months at Camusfearna, and often I would lie for hours in the sun by the waterfall, from time to time Mij would appear from nowhere, bounding up the bank from the water, to greet me as though we had been separated for weeks.

There is a patron saint of otters, St Cuthbert—the eider duck, too shares his patronage, clearly he was a man who bestowed his favours with the most enlightened discrimination—and there exists an eye-witness account of his converse with them

It was his way for the most part to wander in those places and to preach in those remote hamlets perched on steep rugged mountain sides where other men would have a dread of going, and whose poverty and rude ignorance gave no welcome to any scholar. Often for a whole week, sometimes for two or three,

- *abbey*

near. One night, a brother of this same monastery saw him go silently out, and stealthily followed on his track, to see where he was going or what he would do. And so he went out from the monastery and, his spy following him, went down to the sea, above which the monastery was built and wading into the depths all the waves swelled up to his neck and arms kept his vigil through the dark with chanting voiced like the sea. As the twilight of dawn drew near, he waded back up the beach, and

on the san-  
pantings and trying to dry them with their tur, and which was  
good office was rendered, and they had his benediction they  
slipped back again beneath their native waters. He himself  
returned home, and sang the hymns of the office with the  
brethren at the appointed hour. But the brother who had  
stood watching him from the cliffs was seized with such panic  
that he could hardly make his way home, tottering on his feet  
and early in the morning came to him and fell at his feet.

begging forgiveness with his tears for his foolish attempt, never doubting but that his behaviour of the night was known and discovered

"To whom Cuthbert "What ails you, my brother? What have you done? Have you been out and about to try to come at the truth of this night wandering of mine? I forgive you, on this one

boldness had given and the brother kept silence on the piece of valour that he had seen, until after the saint's death, when he took pains to tell it to many"<sup>1</sup>

Now it is apparent to me that whatever other saintly virtues St Cuthbert possessed he well merited canonization by reason of his forbearance alone. I know all about being dried by otters. I have been dried by them more times than I care to remember. Like everything else about otters it takes place the wrong way round, so to speak. When one plays ball with a puppy, one

—and the human who fetches it. With the human who at the beginning is not trained to this the otter is fairly patient, but persistent and obstinate refusal meets with reprisals. The same upside-down situation obtains when being dried by otters. The otter emerges tempestuously from the sea or the river or the bath, as the case may be, carrying about half a gallon of water in its fur, and sets about drying you with a positively terrifying zeal and enthusiasm. Every inch of you requires, in the view of a conscientious otter, careful attention. The otter uses its back as the principal towel, and lies upon it while executing a series of

going to change one's clothes, in a few minutes the otter will

<sup>1</sup> Helen Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (Constable, 1934)

come rampaging out of the water again intent upon its mission of drying people

I have but little doubt what the good brother of Coldingham monastery really saw. St Cuthbert had been praying at the water's edge, not, as the brother thought (it was, one must bear in mind, night and the light was poor) up to his neck in the waves, and it was entirely the condition of the saint's clothing after he had been dried by the otters that led the observer to deduce some kind of sub-marine devotion. Clearly, too, it was an absolution rather than a simple benediction that the now

brother's ... a saint enjoys being  
vocation for drying  
human  
beds  
foot

otter-dried sofa is only tolerable in the heat of summer. I perceive why St Cuthbert required the ministrations of the eider ducks and the warm down of their breasts: the unfortunate man must have been constantly threatened with an occupational pneumonia.

This aspect of life with an otter had never really struck me before I brought *Mj* to Camusfearna. In London one could run the water out of the bath and by using a monster towel could ... the sitting-house  
fearna.

with the sea a stone's throw on one side and the burn on the other, I have found no satisfactory solution beyond keeping the bedroom door closed and turning, as it were, a blind posterior to wet sofas and chairs.

The manuscript that I was writing that summer became blurred and stained as though by tears, I would lie as I have sunbathing and writing in the grass by the burn, and every n

and again Mij's busy quartering of the stream's bed from the falls to the sea and back again would bring him to the point above

manuscript, sometimes adding insult to injury by confiscating my pen as he departed

In the sea Mij discovered his true, breath-taking aquabatic powers, until he came to Scotland he had never swum in deep waters, for the lakes and lagoons of his native marshes are rarely

and outcrops of rock I could watch him as he dived down, down, down through fathom after fathom to explore the gaudy sea forests at the bottom with their flowered shell glades and mysterious, shadowed caverns. He was able as are all otters and seals, to walk on the bottom without buoyancy, for an otter swims habitually underwater and does not dive with full lungs, depending for oxygen—we must presume in the absence of knowledge—upon a special adaptation of the venous system. The longest that I ever timed Mij below the surface was almost six minutes, but I had the impression that he was in no way taxing his powers and could greatly have exceeded that time in emergency. Normally, however, if he was not engrossed, he would return to the surface every minute or so, breaking it for only a second, with a forward diving roll like that of a porpoise. Swimming at the surface, as he did if he wanted to keep some floating object in view, he was neither very fast nor graceful, a labouring dog-paddle in amazing contrast to his smooth darting grace below water. For hours he would keep pace with the boat, appearing now on this side and now on that, sometimes mischievously seizing an oar with both arms and dragging on it, and from time to time bouncing inboard with a flurry of water, momentarily recalled to his mission of drying people.

Only when I was fishing did I have to leave Mij shut up in the

house, for he was a creature who was at the  
mouth, and my  
hook in his jaw  
the lythe and coal fish that are all one may depend upon in early  
summer and at  
and once more at

again, and the mackerel in their turn force up to the surface the  
lesser fishes upon which they feed, the small, glittering, multi-  
tudinous fry of

little fish fleeing in panic from, perhaps, their own parents  
Sometimes there are curiously local patches of fry at the surface,  
and at sunset when the sea is really as smooth as glass—a much  
misused simile, for it rarely is—I have seen, miles from shore,  
little dancing foot-wide fountains of blue and silver mackerel  
no longer than a man's thumb, and have found no predator  
below them.

After the mackerel had arrived I fished for a few minutes in the  
tool of every evening, for them Mij, though he never caught one  
himself, so far as I knew, had an insatiable passion, as had Jonnie  
before him, and I too welcomed them, perhaps because of child-  
hood associations. When I was a child in Galloway we used to  
fish for mackerel by

out a snapping brown sail) We caught out the  
bated the hook each time, and if we caught twenty or



in an afternoon we chattered about it for weeks. It was not, I think,  
 came 1  
 feàrna,  
 dumpi

to a few minutes. A darrow consists of a twelve-foot cast carrying up to twenty-two flies of crudely-dyed hen's feathers, weighted at the bottom with a two-pound sinker. The boat is stationary in anything from six to twenty fathoms of water, and the darrow and line are allowed to run out until the sinker bumps the bottom. By that time, as often as not in Camusfeàrna bay, there are half a dozen or so mackerel on the hooks. If there are not, it is simply a question of hauling in two fathoms of line and letting it run out again, and repeating this process until either the boat drifts over a shoal or a moving shoal happens to pass beneath the boat. Sometimes the mackerel are in shallower water, clear water where one can see fathoms down to pale sand and dark sea-tangle and rushing shoals of aquamarine fish as they dart at the bright feathers. Quite often every single fly is taken at once; then at one moment the line is lead-heavy, tugging and jerking, and at the next light as floating string as the mackerel

barbs sunk deep in hands and legs of mackerel fishers, there was only one way of extraction, and a very painful one it was—to push the hook clean through, as opposed to pulling on it, then to snip off the barb with wire cutters and work the hook all the way back again.

It is not always mackerel that take the darrow flies, there are sauth and lythe and the strangely heraldic gurnards, so fantastically armoured with spikes and thorns as to make their capture by

rarely gratuitously painful feat took the shag just over half an hour of grotesque convulsion, and when the stunt was at last

significantly distended as to force the head far back down the spine and flush with it—unable to rise or even to swim without danger of ridicule

reaching in with one paw and averted head and I in turn learned to turn over the larger stones for him so that after a time he would stand in front of some boulder too heavy for him to move and thus, an old fire

Near the edge of the tide he would search out the perfectly camouflaged flounders until they shot off with a wake of rising sand-grains like smoke from an express train—and farther out in the bay he would kill an occasional sea trout, these he never brought ashore, but ate them treading water as he did so while I thought a little wistfully of the Chinese who are said to employ trained otters to fish for them. My I thought with all his delightful camaraderies, would never offer me a fish I was wrong but when at last he did so it was not a sea trout but a flounder. One day he emerged from the sea on to the rock ledge where I was standing and slapped down in front of me a flounder a foot across I took it that he had brought this for congratulation, for he had not brought this for inspection before

it of its prey, but after perhaps half a minute of doubt, while Mij redoubled his invitation, I reached down slowly and cautiously for the fish, knowing that Mij would give me vocal warning if I had misinterpreted him. He watched me with the plainest approval while I picked it up and began a mime of eating it, then he plunged off the rock into the sea and sped away a fathom down in the clear water.

Watching Mij in a rough sea—and the equinoctial gales at Carnusfearna produce very rough seas indeed—I was at first sick with apprehension then awed and fascinated, for his powers seemed little less than miraculous. During the first of the gales, I remember I tried to keep him to the rock pools and the more sheltered corners, but one day his pursuit of some unseen prey had taken him to the seaward side of a high dry reef at the very tide's edge. As the long undertow sucked outward he was in no more

higher, surging in fifteen feet tall and as yet unbreaking. I yelled to Mij as the wave towered darkly towards him, but he went on eating and paid no heed to me. It curled over and broke just before it reached him, all those tons of water just smashed down and obliterated him, enveloping the whole rock behind in a booming tumult of sea. Somewhere under it I visualized Mij's smashed body swirling round the foot of the black rock. But as the sea drew back in a long hissing undertow I saw, incredulously, that nothing had changed: there was Mij still lying in the shallow marbled water, still eating his fish.

He rejoiced in the waves, he would hurl himself straight as an arrow right into the great roaring grey wall of an oncoming breaker and so on.

... I thought that some wild urge to seek new lands had seized him and that he would go on swimming west into the Sea of the Hebrides and that I should not see him again.

falls and at all his favourite pools in the burn or among the rock ledges by the sea, I would begin to worry and to roam more widely, calling his name all the while. His answering note of recognition was so like the call of some small dowdy bird that inhabits the trees by the waterside that my heart would leap a hundred times before I knew with certainty that I had heard his voice, and then my relief was so unbounded that I would allow him to dry me without protest.

The first time that I found him in distress was in the dark  
 along the rock at the

reaches the bed of the stream, and in summer the sky's light comes down thin and diffused by a stipple of oak and birch leaves whose branches lean out far overhead. Here and there a fallen tree-trunk spans the narrow gorge, its surface worn smooth by the passage of the wildcats' feet. The air is cool moist, and pungent with the smell of wild garlic and watery things such as ferns and mosses that grow in the damp and the dark. Sometimes the bed of the stream widens to deep pools whose rock flanks afford no foothold, and where it looks as though the black water must be bottomless.

Once Morag asked me in an offhand way behind which I sensed a tentative probing, whether I felt at ease in that place. It was a question that held a tacit confession, and I replied frankly

possibility, I were being followed I catch myself trying

though it were important to my  
have  
lead,  
ever

To conform to the spirit of my confession the gorge ought, of course, to be shunned by bird and animal alike, but it has, in fact, more of both than one might expect. There are foxes' and badgers' and wildcats' dens in the treacherous, near-vertical walls of the ravine; the buzzards and hooded crows nest every year in the branches that lean out over the dark water, below them there are the dippers and grey wagtails (a crass ornithological misnomer for this canary-yellow creature), and, for some reason, an unusual number of wrens that skulk and twitter among the fern. What

ster  
drop-  
That  
ails of

the gorge above the second falls differ little from those of the  
etch below it, then, a further hundred yards up the burn's  
course, the way is blocked by the tall cataract, eighty feet of  
foaming white water falling sheer

My certainly, found nothing distasteful in the reach where my  
ghosts walked, and he had early used his strength and resource to  
scale the Camusfeàrna waterfall and find out what lay beyond  
Thereafter this inaccessible region had become his especial haunt,  
and one from which his extraction presented, even when he was

voice,  
caller

perceiving his faint, bird-like response. On this occasion there  
was more water in the burn than is usual in summer, and there  
had been, too, a recent landslide, temporarily destroying the only  
practicable access from above. I lowered myself into the ravine  
on a rope belayed to the trunk of a tree, and I was wet to

the waist after the first few yards of the burn's bed. I called and called, but my voice was diminished and lost in the sound of birds answered me with one of these birds, it

below him, he was looking at me, and, according to his lights,

were all rotten, and I had to make the rope fast to a stump on the hill above, a stump that grew in soft peat and that gave out from its roots as soon as I had when I stood hard on it.

legs when he saw me. I thought I had the rope at my feet as soon as my arms could reach him, but the harnesses, with their constant immersion, never lasted long and I trusted this one

eye were two jostling, urgent images—the image of the gence of the tree roots above me, and the gradual parting of the rivets that held My's harness together. All in all it was one of the nastiest five minutes of my life, and when I reached the top the rope of the tree roots above me, and the gradual parting of the

and it was put to shame. My had been missing, that

ravine, for nine hours and had perhaps passed most of them on that ledge, for he was ravenously hungry, and ate until I thought he must choke.

There were other absences, other hours of anxiety and search, but one in particular stands out in my mind, for it was the first time that he had been away for a whole night, the first time that I despaired of him. I had left him in the early morning at the burn side eating his eels, and began to be uneasy when he had not returned by mid-afternoon. I had been working hard at my book, it was one of those rare days of authorship when everything seemed to go right, the words flowed unbidden from my pen and the time had passed unheeded so that it was a shock to realize that I had been writing for some six hours. I went out and called for Mij down the burn and along the beach, and when I did not find him I went again to the ravine above the falls. But

realized when, above the second falls I came upon two wildcat kittens at play on the steep bank, they saw me and were gone in a flash, but they had never heard my voice above the sound of the

I left the burn then and went out to the nearer islands, it low tide and there were exposed stretches and bars of soft white sand. Here I found otter footprints leading towards the lighthouse island, but I could not be certain that they were Mij's

imprints were very precise. All that evening I searched and called, and when dusk came and he still did not return I began to despair, for his domestic life had led him to strictly diurnal

o'clock it was blowing strong to gale from the south and on the windward side of the islands there was a heavy sea beginning to pile up, enough, I thought, for him to lose his bearings if he were

trying to make his way homeward through it. I put a light in each window of the house, left the doors open, and dozed fitfully in front of the kitchen fire. By three o'clock in the morning there was the first faint light.

the moment I had done, and after half an hour I was both wet and

scared. The bigger islands gave some shelter from the south wind, but in the narrow channel between them the waves were high.

swim a stroke, would have been feeding the lobsters. To come in order to keep clear

of me, a big bull whose sabre fin seemed to tower a man's length out of the water, and, probably by chance, he turned straight for me. My nerves were strung and tensed, and I was in no frame of mind to assess the true likelihood of danger, I swung and rowed for the nearest island as though man were a Killer's only prey. I grounded on a reef a hundred yards from the tern island, and I was not going to wait for the tide to lift me. Slithering and floundering in thigh-deep water over a rock ledge I struggled

reached the tern island, and the birds rose screaming about me in a dancing canopy of ghostly wings, and I sat down on the





Mij was all over me, drenched and

realized that his harness was burst apart, and perhaps a day or more, he must have been struggling, desperate, waiting for a rescue.

I am aware that this scene of reunion, me had preceded it, must appear to many nauseous. I might write of it and subvert dishonesty, a negation of my feeling for

out which his words are worthiness, and for animals that I adopt would, despite, might essay, reveal itself as intense, even time that Mij meant more to me than any acquaintance, that I should miss his philosophy, and I was not ashamed of it. If perhaps, I knew that Mij trusted me as my own kind, and so supplied a need.

When I missed Mij from his accustomed first to the waterfall for there he was chasing the one big trout that lives in the falls, catching elvers or playing with them had been washed down. Sometimes he would be seen carrying a ping-pong ball, and he would still be at the waterfall, it under water and letting it splash, pouncing on it, playing his own game at which the human onlooker could



flushed silence I thought I knew them all, but I was wrong. Not by the smallest interruption in her flow of speech not by so much as a hint of an indrawn breath did she betray that she had perceived the incident, only her eyes, as she continued her sentence, assumed an expression of unbelieving outrage entirely at variance with her words.

One of the few people who escaped this hall-mark, as it were, of Mij's acquaintance, was Morag. I myself had had both ears pierced early in my association with my namesake, and now enjoyed immunity. To only two other people did he extend the

each, that is to say, he formed an entirely different relationship with Kathleen, whose mere proximity would send him into

pared to put up uncomplainingly with his most exuberant horse play. With Morag he was gentler, less bullying, in his love, and with me more deferential, more responsive to the suggestion of command. But it remained around us three that his orb revolved when he was not away in his own imponderable world of wave and water, of dim green depths and tide-swayed fronds of the sea tangle, we were his Trinity and he behaved towards us much as Mediterranean people do towards theirs with a mixture of trust and abuse, passion and irritation. In turn each of us in our own way depended, as gods do upon his worship, I, perhaps, most of all, because he belonged to the only race of living creature that was ever likely to bear my name.



My seemed in those days to possess a quality of indestructibility, an imperviousness to physical hurt that was little short of miraculous. He succeeded despite all my precautions in falling from the gallery to the parquet floor below but he might, for all the notice he took of the incident have fallen upon a feather bed, his head was caught, without protest in a slamming door and, for a moment, I had been out

box room where he had a tattered armchair of his own and an electric fire that shone down upon it from the wall. When I came in I opened the bathroom door and called him, but there was no response. I went in and saw that the bath was empty of water, at the bottom of it my safety razor was in two pieces lying among splintered pieces of the blade. It did not at that

with self-satisfaction as though conscious of a very difficult task with initiative and acumen and there was not as far as I could discover so much as a scratch on him

I cannot now remember whether when I had been in Iraq I had ever seriously considered what was to be done with an otter during such times as I was unable to look after him myself when, for example I was again abroad or even when I wanted to be away from my own premises for a day or two. Perhaps I had

four or five hours but for no longer unless those I could do in the evening and now I found my activities so hamstrung

inside the gardens he plodded sturdily ahead at the end of his

where, winter long the eagles wheel above the wastes of water, and where they must be the otter's only natural enemy, or perhaps an inborn instinct that his race's foes came from the skies I left him in a grim cage whose last occupant had been a sick wart-hog, and when the door was closed on him and he found himself alone his wails went to my heart I could hear him long

into which he had sunk when shut into a box on the air journey He had refused all food, and after digging at the iron and cement enclosed him until his feet bled he had curled up in my sheep-

into death.

sky and bright autumn sunshine My car was a ferocious vehicle,

that she seemed to require about as often as more modest conveyances need refilling with petrol With the last hundred miles the running-in distance was, on the milometer, completed, but in my anxiety to reach London and my pining otter I left out of account that they had been covered so slowly as to be valueless

for the purpose I came out on to the long straight north of Grantham, and unfortunately there was not another car in sight to slow me down. I had been driving at about 90 m.p.h., now, I thought, I would go very much faster, and, for a short time, I did. The supercharger screamed, dial needles moved with incredible rapidity towards red zones, I had a glimpse of the

trail of oil stretching away behind me. I came to rest opposite to a farmhouse, and all I could think of was whether a train could get me to London before the staff of the zoo sanatorium went off duty for the evening. The farm had a telephone, the only possible train left Grantham in thirty-eight minutes, and I caught it as it was moving out of the station.

Back at the zoo sanatorium, I could not at first even see Mij in his cage. There were a lot of dead fish lying about untouched, and a big basin the size of a hip bath had been slopped about so that there was water everywhere, the sheepskin jacket was lying in a huddle in the middle of this, and there was no movement anywhere. I came in through the steel barred door and called his name, but nothing stirred. I put my hand into the jacket and I felt him warm and breathing, as far into the arm hole as he could push himself. Only when I thrust my hand in beside him until I could touch his face did he begin to awaken. with a slow, dazed

side  
il be

In those two days he had taken on the sour stench of a house odour of stale urine and dejection and indignity that is the hallmark of the captive, he had lost his self-respect and fouled his own bed, so that his usually sweet-smelling fur stank like an ill-kept ferret. It was not an experiment that I ever repeated, but his boarding was clearly a problem to which I had to find a solution.

He paid one more visit to the zoo, but this time not as a captive. I had for long wanted to have a clear, eye-level view



would be like for me to remain at Camusclàrna waiting day after day for the return that I did not believe possible. He did not give way an inch.

I learned later from someone else with more humanity 'I felt I couldn't sit by and see you deceived,' he said 'It's just not a decent action in a man and that's the truth. I saw the body of the beast on the lorry when it stopped in the village and there wasn't a hair out of place on the whole skin—except the head, which was all bashed in. If he didn't know fine it was yours he knew then because I told him. You want to get your head seen to " I said if you think that's a wild otter, or if you think a wild one would wait for you to kill it in broad daylight " It's just a pack of lies he's telling you, and I couldn't think of you looking and calling for your pet up and down the burn and by the tide every day, and him dead all the while '

I got the story little by little. Mij had been wandering widely for some days past and though he had always returned at night he must have covered great distances, for he had turned up one day at a hamlet some eight miles south by sea. There he had been recognized and gone unmolested, the next day he had journeyed north up the coast to the village where he was killed. Earlier in the day he had been . . .

deduction. Mij had been on his way home when he had met Big Angus, and he had never been taught to fear or distrust any human being. I hope he was killed quickly, but I wish he had had one chance to use his teeth on his killer.

He had been with me for a year and a day on the night he had left London.









## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I MISSED My desperately, so much that it was a year before I

... that it seemed, after he had gone from it, hollow and insufficient, for the first time all the familiar things in which I had taken joy appeared as a stage backcloth against which no player moved. I did not stay there after I knew that he was dead, instead, I returned at once to Sicily and resumed a work that had by

affected by the death of one wild animal, but some part of me stood aside and questioned the validity, the morality, perhaps of such an attitude in face of the human misery surrounding me. Like my occupancy of the Isle of Soay, that year now appeared to me episodic, sharply defined at beginning and end, and without possible extension, but, as in that other instance, I was wrong

beautiful animal rather larger than a very large cat, with  
 outline creation in soft blue-grey fur, with a foxy black-

part of the time she remained almost perpetually on heat, what was noticeable, however, was not so much the heat as the humidity. For the rest, she had some deep-seated psychosis that made her about as suitable a pet as a wild-caught leopard. For nine hundred and ninety-nine minutes out of every thousand

grievous bodily harm was to spring from some high bookcase to one's shoulder—she could leap twenty feet without apparent effort—and claw for the eyes with the rending pins on her fingers. Whatever the early traumatic experience responsible for this hideous treachery with windows,

I was standing:

touching it, at the moment of the third and final outrage I was talking through the window to someone on the pavement outside.

I think I was fortunate not to have been killed by Kiko, for I ignored the danger. She slashed my right eyelid as an eye and clawed with my hands and as a result bear scars that I shall never lose, for her teeth were slashing instruments with razor-sharp edges. I excused this on the ground that she had interpreted my movement as a gesture of aggression. The next time I used my arms rather than my hands to cover my eyes, and Kiko lost balance and fell to the floor. She seemed to me to be making angry feints at

all at once could have produced that astonishing volume, I got out of the room somehow, and made for the bathroom, leaving behind me a trail of blood that appeared appropriate to a slaughter-

house. There I found that my tibial artery was sticking out of my calf like a black cigarette end, and spouting blood to a distance of more than a foot. I soaked a handkerchief and tried to apply a tourniquet, but my knowledge had deserted me, I could not remember the pressure point. At the end of several minutes trying here and there I estimated that I had by now lost something like two pints of blood, and I wasted several more seconds trying to calculate how soon I should lose consciousness, for I was already beginning to feel weak and shaky. I made out that at the present

lemurs in the Chester Zoo. She is still mine, and once I hoped that she would breed and I might rear her offspring well sheltered from trauma, but now I feel that lemurs, sharing as they do a common ancestor with man, might require as careful choosing as do human friends.

clashing bore, his hobbies, his  
barrassing. Later, after he had moved on to less exacting ownership than mine, I was offered another with the curious but most appropriate name of Hitchcock, though he proved, in fact, to have been christened by the surname of his owners, it was a reminder, and I declined.

I did not experiment with any other animals, none of these creatures, had, anyway, the least affinity with Camusfàrna. I acquired instead, a baker's dozen of small, brilliant tropical



ventional romance it was buried treasure, not symbolic treasure, but the hard practical glitter of coins in the peat. Now, but alas during my year of absence, the lily was thus gilded. Two forestry

... on the hill-side above the house, came  
dropped, together with  
en once contained. They  
were for the most part ... century, of Mary Tudor,  
Philip and Mary Elizabeth and James I, and one, the largest of  
them all a dollar piece of Frederick Ulric Duke of Brunswick and  
Luneburg, the savings probably, of some soldier of fortune a  
mercenary who, like many Highlanders of old, had sold his  
sword and his courage to the service of foreign commanders.  
The cache, if cache it was rather than a purse hurriedly hidden  
when the enemy was already in sight, must have been a secret  
kept to himself and whether he died fighting in some far-off  
land or in the bitter, vicious skirmishes of clan warfare, his  
treasure had thereafter remained undisturbed for more than three  
centuries.

In the early spring of the following year I made up my mind to go back to Camusfearna. There, with the cold, bright March weather shining on the landscape that had long become my real home, I found myself assailed again by echoes of the emptiness that I had experienced when Mij was killed, dumbly at first, and then clear and undisguised came the thought that the place was incomplete without an otter that Mij must have a successor; that, in fact there must always be an otter at Camusfearna for as long as I occupied the house.

Having at last made up my mind, I turned all my attention to

... Mij's exigence,  
ffered to find an  
- examination of  
in Camusfearna.  
the bay is called  
boulders forming  
in an earlier year,  
s, there had been a  
of the inner cham-

litter of cubs there. But now, when...

bers had been well ordered and lined with fresh bedding, there was no sign of young, and the public lavatory was little used. There is a lavatory at every otter holt, and the excrement (which is known as 'spraint', and has no offensive odour, being composed almost entirely of crunched fish bones, or, in the case of shore-

of spraint whose deposition must have been an acrobatic feat for the tottering cub

One by one I visited all the holts of which I knew, but there seemed no otters breeding in the Camusfearna area. I did not despair of acquiring a cub locally, for otters have no 'breeding season', and cubs have been found in every month of the year, but as a second string I wrote to Robert Angorly in Basra, and asked if he could arrange with the Marsh Arabs to get me another of Mij's species

In response to Angorly's request the Marsh Arabs brought in a succession of cubs, three of which were *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*, but each in turn died within a few days of arrival. This he at last put down to the fact that for days before arrival they had been tended by ungentle and inept hands, now he said flatly that he would accept no cub that had been more than twelve hours capti

June he wrote to

England when I li

but he personally believed her to belong to yet another undiscovered race. She lived in the house, and was as playful and friendly as any dog

With this apparent certainty of a successor to Mij, I began to make elaborate preparations, for I was anxious to make the fullest use of my hard-earned experience. My early enquiries for an otter-keeper had at last borne fruit, and now I was able to engage

on .

co .

Angorly asking him to postpone dispatch until the same flight on Tuesday the 15th.

On Monday, 14th July, revolution swept Iraq, and on that Tuesday they were playing football with the Crown Prince's head in the streets of Baghdad. Of Robert Angorly, who by nature of his office as chief game warden numbered as one of the tyrant's personal entourage, I have heard no word since.

One incident stands out from that golden, Mediterranean summer at Camusfearna, a summer spoiled only by my own small vacuum of frustration my little foxes that spoiled the vines and robbed my loved landscape of its full stimulus

This was a spectacle of such magnificence and magnitude that it should, perhaps, have quelled in me an obsession as freakish as the desire for the companionship of a particular species of wild animal. Often before I had seen the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis, flicker and tremble across the silent night sky above the mountains, but never, until that night had I understood their fearful majesty, or the sense of utter negation that they could bring.

Tex Geddes, who had been my fellow harpoon-gunner in the Island of Soay Shark Fisheries, had come over to visit me from Soay, which he had bought when the venture was over. He left his boat anchored in the bay before the house, and we found so

[illegible]

under a stupendous conical canopy, in the arena, perhaps, of a

cosmic circus, where infinitely far overhead a multi-coloured

a terrible and remote grandeur.

Here and there the rays were interrupted and jagged, like the

nights that I have seen it was at the same time the most beautiful and the most terrible, it awoke in me some ancient racial animism, so that I felt that I could throw myself prostrate to worship and to placate

In the autumn I made another attempt to acquire an otter, but by now with diminishing hope. A friend arranged to import, through a London dealer, two Indian Clawless otters, he was to keep one and I the other. They were described as being young and tame, a male and a female.

They were due to arrive at London Airport at about one o'clock in the morning, and such was our anxiety for their welfare that we were there to meet them. There was, however, no trace of them, and, reflecting that they were consigned to a dealer to whom they represented hard cash, we returned to bed. We

friend's in his wife's lap, she had sat up all night trying to get the pathetic little creature back to life.

It is, of course, precisely those people who find such men the most repugnant that by their patronage keep alive the nauseating market in wild animals, and after this I was deterred that I would try no more importing of otters by normal channels.

These misfortunes might in themselves have deterred one less obsessed than I, but there was yet another in store, more tantalizing even than its predecessors, for this time all obstacles seemed already to have been surmounted. A veterinary officer in Singapore presented a hand-reared house-living pet otter to the English zoo. The news of this action reached me immediately, and I at once offered an exchange for the abominable Kiko whose market value was some four times that of the otter. My offer was accepted in writing and I travelled south from Camusfearna to take delivery. During the twenty-four hours occupied by my journey, however, a friend of mine, all unaware of the action, set about trying to obtain the otter for me, and to this end contacted the previous owner, who was spending a brief holiday in the north of England. For some reason this gentleman had been told that the otter was not for sale (with no intention of selling it to the zoo concerned, it remains to this day).

After this third disappointment I made up my mind to rear a cub in Scotland, and with that end in view I returned to Camusfearna, for a prolonged stay, in the spring of 1959.

I had been there for no more than a week when there occurred by far the strangest episode in the saga of my efforts to acquire a cub. A coincidence so extravagant, partaking so insolently of the fantastic, that it has never been repeated or in any way.

...odd miles away, to meet an arriving guest, a foundation guest, as it were, who over many visits had constructed much of the Camusfearna

furniture, and who with me had watched the house grow from an empty shell. I arrived very early in the village to do some necessary shopping, and had lunch in the hotel, a large and exceedingly glossy hotel that caters for the most moneyed element of the tourist trade, in the summer it is loud with Cadillacs and transatlantic accents. Now, however, it was comparatively empty, and on falling into conversation with the hall-porter I found that we had many acquaintances in common. He remembered my shark-fishing boat the *Sea Leopard*, we shared affectionate memories of Captain Robertson of the island steamer *Lochmor*, who, because of a voice pitched in an almost

must, and there was among his passengers a certain admiral, spending his leave in the Hebrides. Peering from the boat-deck into the enveloping white screen, the admiral thought the ship on a course to lead her into a minefield and as the minutes passed and the *Lochmor* churned on unheeding he grew more and more apprehensive. At length his alarm became so acute that he decided to beard the captain on the bridge. The two had never met, and Squeaky was quite unaware that he was carrying a high-ranking naval officer. Gazing glassily ahead with his remarkably protuberant blue eyes and dreaming perhaps of happy deals in coupon-free Haccus tweed at the northern extremity of his run, he was suddenly outraged to observe standing at his elbow a stocky little man in a raincoat and a Homburg hat. Squeaky was an habitually irascible man, and he exploded.

"Ket off my pluttie pridge, you pugger!" he shouted in a voice like that of an angry wren.

whereas that he was in civilian clothes, squeaky, though by nature

ould I be toing for

Atmural?

'Well—Captain Robertson—I wondered whether you would be kind enough to give me our position.'

'Position? Ach, well, we're chust here or hereabouts.'

'No, no, Captain, I meant our position on the chart.'

'Is it a chart?' shrilled Squeaky. 'I haven't seen a chart for forty years!'

The admiral was insistent. 'Ach, well, Atmural, if you're s keen to be seeing a chart, come down to my capin and have wee tram, and we'll see what we can find you.'

The two went below to the captain's cabin, and after the 'wee tram' Squeaky began to root about in his chart drawer. There were charts of the Indian Ocean and the China Sea, chart of Polar seas and of the Caribbean, of the English Channel and the Skagerrak, at last, seemingly at the very bottom of the

Well, Atmural, it's hereabouts we are, and this is our course northwards.'

The admiral stared ominously at a sprinkling of black dots in the ship's path. 'What,' he asked bleakly, 'are these?'

upon the dream-like happenings of two hours later. Had we not in those few minutes discovered the bond of mutual friends and recollections, those extraordinary events would never have taken place.

of sight of the gravel sweep beyond the glass. Suddenly the hall porter came running over to us from the hall.

'Mr Maxwell!' he called 'Mr Maxwell! Come quick to the door and tell me what's this strange beast outside—quick!'

I have an open mind on the subject of so-called telepathy and extra-sensory perception in general; I have had one or two

guest or whether he had a separate moment of clairvoyance, he too had a sudden and vivid knowledge of what was outside the door

Four people were walking past the hotel, making for a car parked near to the jetty. At their heels lolloped a large, sleek otter, of a species that I had never seen, with a silvery-coloured head and a snow-white throat and chest. I had a deep feeling of unreality, of struggling in a dream.

I rushed up to the party and began to jabber, probably quite incoherently, about Mybil and how he had been killed and about how time and time again my efforts to find a successor had been frustrated at the eleventh hour. I must have been talking a great deal, because what they were saying in reply

bottle. In six weeks we've got to go back to West Africa, so it looked like a zoo or nothing—what else could we do? Everyone admires her, but when they come to the point of actually owning her they all shy off. Poor Edal, it was breaking my heart.

We were sitting on the steps of the hotel by this time and the otter was nuzzling at the nape of my neck—that well-remembered, poignant touch of hard whiskers and soft face-fur.

By the time I had taken in what her owners, Dr Malcolm Macdonald and his wife, from Torrington, were saying, the party

there was to meet my guest, and the only reason I had left



a half-Alsatian bitch. The composition of the other half was open to speculation and she was about a year old. Very soon after our arrival at Sapele she had turned up from God knows where, a spindly-legged, pot-bellied, thoroughly ugly and very sick puppy. We took her in, and she recovered to stay with us and grow into a beautiful animal, a constant friend and a natural guard dog.

Now Priscilla took upon herself a most important function, which was probably vital to the successful rearing of the newcomer.

Responding to the little creature's cries for help, gently but firmly and with a somewhat officious air, she nuzzled the cloth and licked. She was rewarded with a positive explosion of and a stream of excrement. The cub's cries became less though they were not . . .

langer will serve

In due course the bottle was prepared. Paula took the cub into the crook of her arm and offered her the rubber teat, as soon as she tasted the milk she sucked avidly, but she was soon satisfied taking little more than an ounce, and fell into a deep contented sleep.

While she slept we took stock of the situation.

At the end of her morning's shopping in Sapele Paula had noticed several Africans standing arguing around one of their number who held a box containing it seemed to her at first, a couple of very young puppies. Their talk caught her interest.

"Which kind of beef dis?" said one.

"Na tree-bear," answered another.

"At all," said a third. "Dis na rabbit" (Rabbit is the local name for a species of big rat). A fourth was emphatic in his disbelief.

"Na lie," he said.

“Paula’s curiosity overcame her and she went to see for herself. At the same time a senior African joined the group. This be the piccin of water-dog,” he intoned, settling the controversy for good.

'It transpired that two young fishermen had come upon the bolt in a river bank and heard the cubs inside. So the cubs were dug out, and it is certain that if they had been old enough to show

ther . . .  
 muc  
 Sape . . .  
 of . . .  
 large sums of money for useless beasts—particularly if the beasts  
 are small and helpless and sure to die if left

There were two cubs a male and a female. The female was larger and lighter in colour than the male. It seemed somewhat

the white was sharply divided from the grey at a line which extended from the angle of the jaw to the shoulder. Their tails were no thicker than an ordinary pencil.

'After much palaver Paula secured possession of the female cub for the single pound note she had with her and extracted a promise that should the other cub not be sold to a European within a very short time it would be brought to our house. The

We were staying at an oil-palm plantation in the south of the British Cameroons and one evening we were on a promontory of high ground at a remote edge of the

Below us on our left there was a big river running in spate. From its far bank the dense black rain forest stretched for endless unknown miles into the heart of Africa. Directly below us, from a waterfall to our right, a clear stream flowed through deep pools to join the river. The brief equatorial dusk was beginning.

Among the rocks below the waterfall two brown figures were playing, indistinct at that distance. For several minutes they sported together, sometimes upright, sometimes rolling on the smooth bare rocks. Then taking cleanly to the water, they swam with magnificent sinuous grace through the clear calm pools a hundred feet below us. Unmistakably otters they were then, but so big that our native otters must seem pygmies by comparison. They were not less than five feet from nose to tip of tail, lithe and powerful, a breath-taking sight.

" . . . he might grow so big. We guessed he had been . . . "

"Two hours after her first meal with us she wakened and struggled free of the towel which was her temporary bed. Using her stubby loose-jointed limbs as oars she rowed herself along on her sleek belly. She was pleased to receive our attentions and took another small feed, made up of one part of ordinary canned evaporated milk with two parts of boiled and cooled water added. This was a pretty strong mixture and when, as did occur in the first two or three weeks, the cub had diarrhoea we diluted it by simple rule of thumb reckoning. In any case we came to the conclusion that some looseness of the bowels with mucus is normal to an infant otter. The mixture was served at a little above body heat, i. e. perceptibly warm to the touch at elbow or back of wrist.

"In the first two or three weeks she slept most of the time, as . . . most with every awakening . . . ordination increased . . . and their . . . in proportion, her eyes opened when . . . smokiness cleared. Movements attracted her; she came to recognize her bottle and would stretch out her hands to hold it.





'When she tired she would come to the side to be lifted out and

thrust her muzzle into the hole, poke her fingers through the

prancing

'Her basic conversational vocabulary was a high-pitched whistling "Whee" With loud and soft, short and long and other variations of "Whees" she had quite a lot to say and said it We came to understand much of it Two expressions in particular we knew "Wheeee-uk" said "I want some water in the bath", and several anxious chirping "whees" suggested a swift trip to the garden

'She had to be introduced gently to the out-of-doors It was just too BIG out there From her lavatory patch she would toddle anxiously back to the safety of the doorway There she would pause and turn, head down and wary, as ancestral memories

room one laborious step after another, and was always patently glad to be back This was her home and she accepted us as her parents who loved her and laughed with her and provided all she required And her greatest requirement was our company In her waking hours she would never willingly let us out of her sight It was a requirement we found easy to fulfil, for we never tired of hers

'Her playmates lived here too Priscilla played with Edal



These monkeys are very affectionate in their own crazy way. They love to cling to one and hate to be alone. But they are full of sin. At liberty in a house they leave a trail of devastation, and little can be done to teach them good behaviour. In illustration of this there is a story of a man who set about house-training one. Diligently, when the monkey messed, he would seize it, slap its backside, and toss it out of the window. After some weeks his efforts bore fruit. The monkey would mess on the floor, slap its own backside, and jump out of the window.

When Oweenk was first allowed to meet the toddling Edal she danced and chattered with delight. She cuddled Edal in her arms and searched in her fur—much to Edal's chagrin—and wailed when they were separated. All too soon monkey-wise, the loving turned to mischievous teasing and eventually they became enemies.

To me the much-vaunted human affinity of the monkey wears thin in the presence of an otter, and as these two young creatures grew up together the comparison of their behaviour made a fascinating study.

Edal's tactile handling of objects contrasted with Oweenk's frenzied manipulations; her joyful play with the monkey's staccato caperings. Gay friendliness contrasted with urchin-  
f  
c

...d her front incisor milk teeth and little buds of new enamel appeared in their place. At the same time she became dissatisfied with her bottle. One afternoon when I went to the kitchen refrigerator for a cold drink she tried to scramble into it, snorting loudly and greatly excited. The cook had left some herring roes there and Edal wanted them. I cut them into strips for her and she ate them all. Soon the mystified manager of the Sapele Kingsway Shop wanted to know why on earth we wanted so many of his cold-store herrings. Edal was weaned.

With proper parental pride we applauded these events, but then her eye teeth, the canines of her upper jaw, began to give her much trouble, and our jubilation changed to concern. For





upon and a box of matches was treasure-trove. She appeared to

especially runner beans, enjoyed pastry, and was frantically fond of ice-cream. She would take a piece in both hands and cram it into her mouth, making ecstatic little mewling noises and getting thoroughly messy. When offered a tasty morsel she really wanted she would moan softly and "hurrh" through her nose before taking it.

She drank frequently and spent a great deal of her time in the bathroom, for when not actually in the bath she liked to take her day-time naps there. She liked a towel to sleep on, and if one

a suitable part to suck, then she would suck at it with tremendous fervour, eyes shut tight, mewling and snuffling and wagging her rump until she fell asleep.

making her turn around then dash between her legs to gain a yard or so.

She joined our evening walks with Priscilla and Oweenk and the cats. When we left the house she became very wary, staying close to heel and snorting in alarm at any sudden movement, with an inborn awareness, it seemed, of the persecution to which her race is subject.

Even at home she was apt to



"In seconds a jabbering crowd surrounded us.

"Eh! Look um!"

"Look 'e'n teeth!"

"Dem pass dog own!"

"'E fit to bite man proppah!"

"How 'e no de bite white man?"

"Ah! Dis na doctah. I tink say 'e gie um injection."

A seamy faced character in tattered shorts, evidently a fisherman, pushed into the crowd

"Eh Heh! Na watta-dog! 'E keel feesh fo' watta! 'E bad fo' we! If 'e get chance 'e savvy bite man too much!"

I had started the engine, and as I let in the clutch our knowledgeable friend was expounding the culinary properties of young otters

"As 'e dead now, 'e sweet to chop"

It was decided that Edal should come with us. Polly was to come as well. In the short time remaining I obtained the import permit from London and booked aircraft space. Edal was required to travel in a ventilated box and Polly in a light travelling cage.

We started the journey on an appallingly hot day in early March with a flight from Benin to Lagos. The small aircraft was like an oven in the blistering mid-day sun. Throughout the flight the air was turbulent, and the plane was tossed about like a small boat in a storm. We were terribly anxious for Edal.

At Lagos she was unconscious and on the point of death. We rushed her to our rest home, her lump body was fiercely hot, her breathing intermittent and gasping, and her heart fluttered feebly as she struggled for life in the last stage of heat exhaustion. We placed her on her back in the bath in an inch of cool water, moistened her parched mouth, and bathed her limbs with iced water from the refrigerator.

When her condition became a little less desperate we placed



was nearly over now, but there remained an overnight train journey to Inverness.

'At Euston the guard was understanding and helpful. He could not allow Edal to join us in the sleeping accommodation but he took her box into his own warm section of the van where a stove burned, and we were duly grateful.

'At Inverness the morning was crisp and bright. I took delivery of my car at the station and we headed for the country, pausing only to buy some fish for her. The day was fine and clear with

journey. She travelled well by car but was a restless passenger,

Nigeria she was three feet long and weighed fifteen pounds, by May she had grown by ten pounds and a good half dozen inches, and was immensely strong.

'Those were happy weeks indeed, but we were due to go to Ghana in June and again we began to worry about her future. Dearly as we loved to have her with us, the necessity for many more thousands of miles of travel made parting with her, at least for a time, inevitable. We were anxious to see her properly

ling holiday hitched a lift with us. They wanted to go to Skye, and since the ferry was but a few miles off our route we elected to take them there.

'We made our usual intermittent progress, stopping every twenty miles or so to let Edal out for a while. In the early afternoon we stopped at the Lochalsh Hotel and wandered along the terrace, looking across to the hills of Skye. The gods were smiling on us that day, for they had taken the nagging question of Edal's future into their own hands. As we came abreast of the hotel door a fox was bled for



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOTHING was decided at that first meeting, Edal's owners not unnaturally wanted to satisfy themselves that this extraordinary coincidence was all it seemed on the surface, and that she would find with me the home they wanted for her. They promised to write during the next few days, Edal jumped into their car with the ease of familiarity, and as they drove away she appeared leaning far out of the passenger window, one hand delicately shielding her windward ear.

A week later she visited Camusfearna for an afternoon, then, after an interval of ten days Malcolm and Paula came to stay for a week-end, to leave Edal with me when they went. I had not been

the house with a fence that might not, perhaps, have suited Mij, but which would, I thought, be barrier enough to baffle this apparently more docile, less self-willed creature if she should think in the first days to seek her late foster parents, within these confines we dug a pool and piped to it water that rose in a fountain let appropriate to more formal surroundings. The entrance

fault of my own

Even during that first week-end, while I was still a stranger to her and her surroundings were unfamiliar, I was so enchanted by Edal that I found it difficult to believe my own good fortune. Because she did not feel herself to be in her own home I



in those first days only a fraction of her fascination, a mere taster of the piquant personality I came to know later, but I saw enough to know that if I had searched the world over I could have found no more perfect successor to Mijbil.

On the third day, while Edal was sleeping soundly on the sofa, Paula and Malcolm left silently. Our good-byes were hushed, and I was not so awoken that softly. I felt their own feeling for her, and I felt myself to me, and I felt not jubilation in my long-postponed moment but sadness for the sundered family.

After they had gone Jimmy and I sat beside Edal on the sofa, waiting miserably for her awakening and the panic that we thought would follow the realization of her abandonment. An hour passed, two, and still she slept on. Presently Morag arrived, the Macdonalds had called at Drumhaclach as they left, and told her that Edal might feel less lost and despairing in feminine company. So we three sat silently and anxiously, as around a sick bed, and my thoughts wandered between the sleeping animal and her late owners, for I had recognized in them the same obsessional feeling for their otter as I had experienced for Mij, and for nothing in the world would I have changed places with them as they drove home desolate now.

When Edal awoke at last she appeared to notice little amiss. Paula's jersey lay beside her on the sofa, her own towel and toys were on the floor, and if she was aware of her owners' absence she was too well-mannered a guest to comment upon it so early. Also, as was to be expected, she got on extremely well with Morag.

It is time to give a more detailed description of Edal as she was when she came to me early in May 1959.

By far the strangest and most captivating aspect of her was that of her hands. Unlike Mij, whose forepaws were, despite the dexterity he contrived with them, true paws with wide connecting webs between the digits, hers were monkey-hands, unwebbed,

object that she could find.

Once in a hospital in Italy I watched a cripple child practising the use of artificial hands. She had before her a solitaire board and a numbered set of marbles, the holes were numbered too, but the marbles had been wrongly placed, and her task was to transpose them until each ball and socket corresponded. She worked with complete absorption, oblivious of onlookers, and with each passing minute she discovered new powers. Once, too, I had watched a ball juggler practising his act with the same withdrawn, intuned eye, the same absence of irritation or impatience

would lie upon her back passing them from hand to hand, or occasionally to the less adept grip of her webbed but almost nailless hind feet, working always with two or more objects at a time, gazing fixedly at them all the while, as though these extremities of hers were in some way independent of her and to be watched and wondered at. At moments it was clearly

limbs

Because, it seemed, of her delight in her own dexterity, it was her practice to insert her plaything of the moment into some container from which it had then to be extracted, a boot or a shoe

ently fumbling fingers she would reach disconcertingly to the trouser-pockets of any guest who sat down in the house, hardly waiting for an introduction before scattering the spoils and hurrying away with as much as she could carry. With these curious hands she could, too, throw such playthings as were small enough to be enclosed by her fingers. She had three ways of doing this, the most usual was a quick upward flick of the arm and forepart of the body as she held her clenched fist palm downward but she would also perform a backward flick which tossed the object over her shoulder to land at her other side, and, on occasion usually when in a sitting position with her back to the wall she would throw overarm.

• • • • •

she shot the ball with one of her long tail round with a powerful scoop to bring it back within range of her feet

" • • • • • and only heavy body inhabiting it cannot be described appears to be attached to the creature inside it at six points only the base of the nose, the four wrists or ankles and the root of the tail. When lying at ease upon her back the surplus material may be observed disposed in heavy velvety folds at one or other side of her, or both, a slight pressure forward from the base of her neck causes the skin on her forehead to rise in a mountain of pleats like a furled plush curtain, when she stands upright like a penguin the whole garment slips downwards by its own inertia into heavy wrinkles at the base of her belly, giving her a non-upsettable, pear-shaped appearance.

She is thus able to turn, within surprisingly broad limits, inside her own skin, and should one attempt to pick her up by the scruff of the neck one is liable to find oneself gripping a portion of skin rightly belonging to some quite different part of her body, merely to the neck.

The colour of the chest and as I had

enjoyment that the one from which makes wholly understandable. The bib is divided from a silvery, brocade-texture head by a sharp line of demarcation immediately below the ears, the body and the enormous tail are pale mauvish-brown, velvet above and silk below. Beyond the points of attachment at the four wrists the fur is of an entirely different character, it changes from velvet to satin, tiny, close-lying hairs that alter colour according to how the light falls upon them. The tightly gloved hands and the enormous fullness above the wrists give her the

does a bird lifting her head to allow the liquid to trickle down

one's lap and settle herself with a heavy and confiding plump, head up and expectant. Then she opened her mouth and one poured the spoonfuls into it, while the soup noises reached a positive crescendo. At the end of this performance she would insist upon inspecting the cup to make certain that it was indeed empty, she would search into it with enquiring fingers and abstracted gaze, then belching and hiccapping from time to

precarious of swimmers. Even in the wild state otter cubs have little if any instinct for water, and their dam teaches

the evenings. Then one day our attention strayed from her for a moment or two and she was gone. Where the wire joined the little shed at the north end of the house, nearest to the bridge and the route by which she had arrived with Malcolm and Paula, she had found that she could force the barrier. By the time we had made sure of her absence she had perhaps ten minutes' start.



We guessed rightly the route that she had taken; when we reached Drummfiachlach she had already been there for five

stars (I have found that if there is a stairway an otter is possessed of an inalienable instinct to ascend it) and wailed piteously. She seemed pleased to see us, and greeted Jimmy with notes almost as loud of those of her distress, but she did not want to come back to Camusfearna. We had never put the lead on her before, but now there seemed no alternative

ponderous person, for I was still under misapprehension as to the threat contained in this item of her repertoire. As it was, the nervous strain was more exhausting than any load could have been.

her home round his neck like a lead-weighted fur collar.

At the end of a fortnight there was no further danger of her straying. We had provided her with so many distractions so many novelties—and the greatest of these was certainly constant access to running water—that she had been suborned. It was perhaps fortunate for us that this period of acclimatization coincided with the migration of the elvers. For these transparent morsels who swarmed and wriggled in the rock pools below the waterfall and formed a broad snail paced queue up the vertical rock beside the white water she discovered a passion that obscured every other interest. Hour after hour she would pass about these pools where Mij had hunted before her scooping and pouncing grabbing and munching reaching up the rock face to pluck the pilgrims as they journeyed, and from these lengthy outings she would return surfeited to play and to sleep in the kitchen as if she had known no other home.

These elvers however proved no small embarrassment to us for over a period of several weeks they intermittently blocked our water supply and reduced us once again to carrying water in buckets from the burn. In our anxiety to keep Edal occupied and

the only upstream exit from the pool took up their interrupted migration with the same inflexible determination that had inspired them for the past two years ascending the hundred and twenty yard length of pipe until they reached the perforated 'rose' at the top. The perforations in the metal were however just too small to allow passage to their bodies, and there they stuck and died each hole blocked by the protruding head of an elver a pathetic and ironic end to so long and brave a journey. The rose in the pool above the waterfall was accessible to us only by rope descent into the ravine a dozen times a day we would go there and extract the dead elvers but it was like sniping at a swarm of locusts for behind them there were ever more of the journeying host to strangle on the very verge of liberty.



*Edal on the sofa.  
Drawings by the author.*





Routine is, as I have explained, of tremendous importance to animals, and as soon as we saw that Edal was settled we arranged a daily sequence that would bolster her growing security. She had her breakfast of live eels, sent, as they had been for Mij, from London, and then one or other of us took her for a two-hour walk along the shore or over the hills. During these walks she would remain far closer at hand than Mij had done, and we carried the lead not so much as a possible restraint upon her as a safeguard against attack by one of the shepherds' dogs, for Edal loved dogs, regarded them as potential playmates, and was quite unaware that many dogs in the Western Highlands are both encouraged and taught to kill otters.

On one of these morning outings with her I had a closer view of a wild otter than ever before. Edal was hunting rock-pool life on a ledge two or three yards from the sea's edge and a few feet above it, she had loitered long there among the small green crabs, butter-fish and shrumps, and my attention had wandered from her to an eagle coasting over the cliffs above me. When I turned back to the sea I saw Edal, as I thought, porpoising slowly along in the gentle waves just beyond the pool where she had been.

I would have touched her with, say, the end of a salmon rod. I hustled to her and began to turn away, but as I did so the tail of my eye perceived something unfamiliar in her aspect, I looked back, and there was a wild otter staring at me with interest and surprise. I glanced down to the pool at my feet, and saw Edal, out of sight of the sea, still groping among the weed and under the flat stones. The wild otter stayed for a longer look, and then, apparently without alarm, resumed his leisurely progress southward along the edge of the rocks.

In those rock pools along the shore Edal learned to catch gobies and butter-fish, occasionally she would corner a full-grown eel in the hill streams, and little by little she discovered the speed and the predatory powers of her race. Her staple diet was of eels sent alive from London, for probably no otter can remain entirely healthy without eels, but she was also fond of ginger nuts, bacon fat, butter, and other whimsical *hors d'œuvre* to which her upbringing by humans had conditioned her. Among local fish she

disdained the saith or coal fish, tolerated lythe and trout, and would gorge herself gluttonously upon mackerel. We put her eels alive into her pool where after eel fishers take it for

surface, composed of a number of round excrescences like the balls of fingers, which enable her to catch and hold between them an eel that would slither easily through any human grasp.

By the end of June she was swimming as an otter should, diving deep to explore dim rock ledges at the edge of the sea tangle,

noticed, appears about six feet behind an otter swimming a

"...which number  
not though

wary only in the breeding season, was a thing of the past. By 1959 there were still some two or three pairs nesting at the loch, and I arranged for one brood to be hatched under a hen at Monreith and sent up to Camusfearna. After a long and circuitous journey by train and boat five goslings arrived, feathered but not fledged, gawky, uncouth and confiding displaying a marked predilection for human company at variance with the traditional characteristics of their race. This paradox was pleasing to me for like many others I had come to a fondness for wild animals and birds by way of bloodthirstiness, in my youth I had been an ardent wildfowler, and these five goslings were the direct descendants of birds I had shot and wing-tipped or otherwise lightly wounded at the morning flight years before. It had, in fact, been the keeping and taming of a few wounded greylags shot in blustering winter dawns on the salt marsh and mud-flats of Wigtown Bay that had initiated my attempt at a living collection of all the wild geese of the world, and these gabbling flat-footed five who tried so persistently to force their way into the house at Camusfearna were the twelfth generation, or so in descent from the victims of my gun. Perhaps it was from some obscure part of the guilt under which, unrecognized, we labour so often, that I wanted these birds to fly free and unafraid about Camusfearna wanted to hear in the dawn and the dusk the wild music of those voices that long ago used to quicken my pulse as I waited shivering in the ooze of some tidal creek with the eastern horizon aflame.



As a daily delight and as an ornament to Camusfearna these particular wild geese exceeded my most optimistic expectations. They had, as yet, been unable to fly, only

flapping hopefully and grotesquely, lifting themselves a foot or so into the air and progressing in a series of ill-co-ordinated and ungainly hops. As it had fallen to Jimmy Watt and myself,



sternation, to be airborne. After this most undignified crash landings, but in those few seconds they had found their powers, within a week they were strong and certain on the wing, and in answer to a call from the house they would come beating up the wind from the beaches of the distant islands.



profound relief apparent, one would have said, in their every action, they came trooping out at my heels and almost at once took wing for the shore



From the last days of May until early September the summer, that year, took leave of absence, while England panted in equatorial heat and the coast roads from London were jammed by twenty-mile queues of motionless cars, Camusfearna saw only sick gleams of sunshine between the ravings of gale and rain, the burn came down in roaring spate, and the sea was restless and petulant under the unceasing winds. The bigger dingby dragged her moorings and stove a plank, and there were few days when the little flat-bottomed pram could take the sea without peril. Because of this, and because, perhaps, I welcomed Edal's fear of the

a chuckling procession down the beach, and the whole strange convoy set off from the tide's edge together, Edal shooting

line, with the glorious ochres and oranges of tide-bared weed as a foreground to the heather, reddening bracken, and the



After the first of these paradise days among the islands the geese failed for the first time to return at nightfall. In the morning I called for them, but there was no greeting chorus in reply. It was as yet early for them to have felt any migratory instinct, which I thought would in any case have probably been extinguished by some generations of static forebears; and when I had seen no sign of them by the afternoon I feared that they had wandered too far and fallen prey to some tourist with a .22 rifle. I had, indeed, given up all hope of them when in the early evening I landed with Edal upon one of the white-sand beaches of the islands, drawn there by the desire to make the acquaintance of some visitors who had landed from a sailing dinghy. I was talking to them when I saw, half a mile or so to the northward, the long unhurried beat of goose wings against the sky and recognized, with an absurd surge of joy, my missing greylags. I called to them as they made to pass high overhead in the sunshine, and they checked in mid air and came spiralling down in steep, vibrant descent, to alight with a flurry of pinions on the sand at our feet.

It never ceased to give me delight, this power to summon wild geese from the heavens as they passed, seemingly steady as a constellation upon their course, or to call to them from the house when the sun was dipping behind the hills of Skye, to hear far off their answering clangour, and see the silhouette of their wings

had been the discarded dregs, the lees, not worth removal, more pleasure, perhaps in their peaceful, undemanding co-existence than had any medieval nobleman in the hawk who at his bidding rose to take the wild duck as they flew or hurl the heron from the sky





Though the greylags gave little trouble and much reward, they produced on occasion as do all creatures for whom one is responsible, moments of acute anxiety. The worst of these was the sight of one of the number, out of my reach, doing its utmost to swallow a fish hook. Edal, as I have said, was fed upon live eels sent from London, this was a costly procedure, and as she grew and her consumption of eels rose beyond the original order for six pounds a week, I had begun experiments to supply her from the Camusfearna burn in which eels abounded. But despite much advice I had failed signally to devise a satisfactory eel trap, and one afternoon we set a number of short lines from the bridge, baited with worms. This proved effective, and we had several eels in a few hours, but I had forgotten the geese. They were not often at the bridge and I had not thought, in any case, that they would be inquisitive enough to investigate the almost invisible lines. Some two hours later, nevertheless, they chose perversely to fly in there from the sea, and by the time that I saw them one had a foot length of trout cast dangling from its bill. At the end of the cast was the hook, a small hook taken from a stripped trout fly and the goose, unaware of danger, was trying hard to swallow what remained. The fineness of the cast was all that impeded the intention but while I watched in an agony of suspense another two or three inches disappeared from view. The other geese gathered round my feet but this one, intent upon its personal problem, kept obstinately to the centre of the pool, while the hook, in response to the gobbling movements of the bill, mounted steadily higher. In the nick of time we lured it to

gripped the cast and  
 I over hand, for the  
 The incident put a  
 temporary full stop to my efforts to supply Edal with eels from the burn

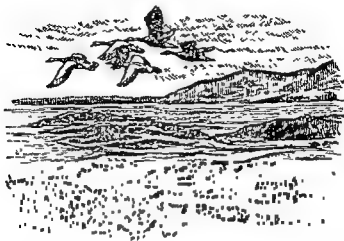
For the same reason the geese became an embarrassment, too, to fishing expeditions at sea when they did not actually accompany the boat out from the beach they would discern it from afar, long after we thought to have eluded their pursuit, they would come winging out over the waves and alight, gabbling,



alongside, pressing in close round the darrow line, fascinated by the fish-hooks and the dancing blue-and-silver glitter of fish hauled in over the gunwale, so that often it became necessary to control a darrow-full of mackerel with one hand and fend the geese from danger with the other. It was at such moment that I understood how difficult life would be if all wild animals and birds were unafraid of man, how complicated the every-day business of living must have become to St Francis.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THIS house had been much transformed since Edal's arrival. While there had been no otter at Camusfearna I had concentrated upon improving the décor and comfort of the rooms; now that the whole premises were once more, as it were, in a state of siege this aspect had perforce to be abandoned for more practical considerations. Every table and shelf had somehow to be raised above the range of Edal's agile inquisition; every hanging object upon the walls moved upward like the population of a flooded town seeking sanctuary upon the rooftops. No longer could there be a paper-table at the end of the sofa, for this recently constructed innovation she appropriated for her own on the first day, tearing and crumpling the effete reading matter until it formed a bed suited to her exacting taste. There she lay upon her back and slept, her head pillowed across a headline describing traffic jams on the roads out of London.

It was exceedingly difficult to elevate every vulnerable object above her reach, for by standing on tiptoe she could already achieve three foot six inches. When wet she would pull down a towel, or several towels, upon which to dry herself, when bored she would possess herself of any object that caught her wayward fancy, and, deeply absorbed, set about its systematic disintegration. These moods would come and go, there were days when she was as sedate as a lap dog, but there were days too,

tons and sea-boots, many of these have over a period of years been patched with red-rubber discs, and Edal early found a fiendish delight in tearing these off and enlarging the holes they hid

Thus the rooms to which she had access acquired the look of country-house parks whose trees display the 'browsing line' so much deplored by late eighteenth-century writers on landscape gardening. From the height above ground to which the trees were branchless it was in those parks, possible to deduce whether the owner kept fallow deer, cattle or horses and by much the same process I was able to compare the relative sizes of Edal and Mij. If there was any doubt at first, at the end of her first month with me she was certainly a much larger creature and yet she was still a full six months younger than he had been when he was killed. Her growth was almost visible. In May Malcolm Macdonald had estimated that she was some forty-two inches long and

fifty  
poun  
into season it was clear that her growth was far from complete. In equatorial America there are otters the size of seals, if they have ever been domesticated the rooms of their owners must present a most curious appearance

Because of the limitations of wall space in the kitchen-living-room it was not advisable to leave Edal quite alone there for



every now and again Edal, discouraged from more direct approach by an unequivocal snap, would tentatively stretch out one of her monkey-like hands and touch the unresponsive yellow rump, making, the while, little plaintive, yearning whines in the back of her throat. She was plainly puzzled by her failure to establish friendly relations, for she was unused to rebuff.

Two dogs only achieved with her a temporary *bonhomie*, but

from the bank. This incident produced a coolness that their relationship did not survive, the pointer became wary and then frankly hostile. When I expostulated at this deplorable lack of stamina her owner replied, 'Well, she never thought she was

among which this was perhaps one of the least regrettable.)

Eric Linklater introduced a great rangy English Setter, a gorgeous beast named Tops'l, and he, too, was at first prepared to chance his arm playing with an otter, this time on the sand,

play with her as Priscilla did in Africa





showed him to be sound in wind and limb, and he resumed anonymity in a larger landscape

Finally, producing a more lasting impression, came a wildcat kitten. Late one afternoon we had discovered that the Calorgas cylinder (an innovation that year) was almost exhausted, and we decided to take the boat up at once to the village five miles

port bow

There, fifteen yards away, was a half-grown wildcat kitten, swimming uncertainly in the direction of the farther island (I have since learned that it is no rarity for wildcats to take to the water, even when they are not pursued, but at the moment it seemed as strange as would a fish progressing over land) The cat was in about two fathoms of water, and swam slowly and very high, so that the whole back and tail were above water and dry

difficult to associate this meek, fluffy, lost kitten with the tameable ferocity of all reports, and I thought that here



opportunity to test the rumours at first hand. But it was difficult to see how Camusfearna could contain with any placidity both a wildcat and an otter, and my thoughts turned to Morag, she, I thought, would welcome this ghost of her childhood days, for long ago she had kept, and mourned the loss of, a hybrid with a wildcat sire. She was at that time housekeeping, during the daylight hours, for the lodge by the river four miles up the coast, so we abandoned our idea of replenishing the Calor-gas supplies and headed for the river. Morag, however, had already left by the mail Land Rover for Drumsfalach. At the lodge we were lent a car, and continued to her home by road. The calm of the cat within the hamper had by now given place to a low but almost continual growl, a menacing sound that suggested a curbed ferocity hardly held in rein.

When I learned that Morag felt herself too cramped by household duties to commit herself to the care of a wildcat, I should, no doubt, have released it, but despite all that I had heard and read of the untameable nature of wildcats I had met no one who could personally contribute to the picture. I knew, too, that it was very rare to capture an undamaged kitten, and I felt that an opportunity to test the validity of the myth was not to be thrown away. I returned to the lodge, and from there telephoned to Dr Maurice Burton, a zoologist who at his home in Surrey keeps and observes a great variety of wild creatures, and who has in the course of a lifetime devoted to the study of animal behaviour acquired experience of most British fauna. Curiously, however, he proved never to have kept a wildcat, and knew no one who had ever tried to tame one, though he did know someone whose lifelong ambition it had been to acquire a healthy kitten for the experiment. He proposed telephoning to this friend, who would in turn telephone to me during the next half hour, and in due course I spoke to Mr William Kingham, who was prepared to leave London by car at dawn the next morning to collect the cat. It was then Friday evening, he expected to complete the seven-hundred-mile journey by Sunday morning.

I carried the now distinctly vocal hamper back by boat to Camusfearna. There was only one way of bridging the next

thirty-six hours to evacuate my bedroom in favour of the kitten and to sleep in the kitchen. This I did with some reluctance, not because I envisaged the shambles to which my room would be reduced, but because it had been but three nights before that I had returned to it after the departure of my last guest.

It was already dark when we beached the boat below the house, and there was no means of obtaining any suitable food for a wildcat that night. I left the hamper open in my bedroom beside a saucer of tinned milk and some sea trout roes. As an afterthought I blocked the chimney with a screwed up ball of wire-netting.



In the morning after a far from novel night in a sleeping-bag by the kitchen fire a cursory inspection of the bedroom discovered no cat. One of the trout roes and all the milk had dis-

genuous

A more detailed examination revealed the cat, in the chimney. It had pulled out the inadequate cork of wire mesh, and



The necessity for shooting birds locally in order to feed this creature worried me. Many of the birds in the immediate vicinity of Camusfearna were tamer, more trusting, than in areas

traitor to the small sanctuary that I had long respected. The situation was made no easier for me by the geese, who insisted on accompanying me, sometimes on foot, sometimes locating me from afar and flying in to join me as I crouched, camouflaged, on the rock of some outlying skerry, by them I was embarrassed, obscurely ashamed that they should witness this predatory side to my nature. I found myself, as I crouched there in the salt wind and spray, repeating a childish little litany 'I am only doing this so that the kitten may live', this, by some absent-minded transposition, reshaped itself into the words and tune of a forgotten hymn 'He died that we might live', and then I realized that my subconscious mind had jumped a gap at which my intellect had jibbed—for after all Christians do eat the body and blood of their God.

So, with distaste, I kept the wildcat supplied with birds that I would rather have seen alive, a turnstone, a shag, an oyster-

remained the major receptacle

On the Monday a telegram arrived explaining that Mr Unaware was five miles by sea, he asked me to telephone to him in Jarrow that evening

The relief that I had hourly awaited being thus indefinitely postponed, I set off again for the village with a faltering outboard motor which completed the northward but not the return journey. By intermittent use of the oars I got home late

night, with the promise of an immediate telegram about the future of the wildcat.

There were further delays and misunderstandings, but a week after the original capture an emissary arrived at the railhead twelve miles north by sea, and dispatched a hired launch to Camusfearna. He did not accompany it himself, I had assumed that he would arrive to stay for the night and receive such information as I could give him about the wildcat's habits so that I was quite unprepared for boxing the animal at once with the launch waiting outside on an ebb tide. However, though the human escort was absent he had sent a stout and commodious crate filled with straw, at the back of which lay a plump unplucked pullet.

To the cat this third and necessarily hurried capture was still further trauma. He—for excremental reasons I vaguely supposed it to be a male—was crouched on a high shelf in the shadow of my typewriter (already knocked down and smashed by the otter), and the first advance of a gloved hand produced a tigerish and highly intimidating snarl of warning. On the second attempt he bounded from the shelf to a table in the window and crouched there growling with his back to the glass.

At this point Jimmy—who had been out in the boat fishing for mackerel when the launch came—arrived and demanded to take control. He put on the gloves and entered the arena with all the confidence of inexperience. At his first near approach the cat became transformed, almost I had said, transfigured. The last trace of resemblance to a fluffy domestic Persian kitten vanished utterly, in its place was a noble savage wild animal at bay before its ancestral enemy. Laying his ears not back but downward from the broad flat skull so that the very tips and the tufts of hair that grew from within them were all that turned upward,

without part, but while one paw was lifted high with extended talons, the other still rested on the table, for the forelegs seemed to have elongated like telescopes, those velvet limbs had in an

instant changed from instruments of locomotion into long-reaching weapons to rake and to slash. As an image of primordial ferocity I had seen nothing to equal it, it was splendid, it was magnificent, but it was war

Jimmy, as yet accustomed only to handling creatures whose bluff was easily called, was undismayed by this display of *furcht-barkheit*, but retired after an instant with a bite clean through glove and thumb-nail

It seemed as if deadlock had been reached, until it occurred to us that we could as it were bottle the cat between the open end of the crate and the window glass, this manoeuvre was instantly successful, and he bolted to the dim interior behind the straw and was silent. That was the last that I saw of him, it is however, not

wildcats enjoy the privilege of protection

It is October, and I have been for six unbroken months at Camusfearna. The stags are roaring on the slopes of Skye across

whose surface was hot to bare feet under summer suns, and the cold, salt-wet wind will rattle the windows and moan in the chimney. This year I shall not be there to see and hear these

horizons. Yet while there is time there is the certainty of return.

Camusfearna

October 1959



Thank you, my friendly daemon, close to me as my shadow,  
 For the mealy buttercup days in the ancient meadow,  
 For the days of my 'teens the sluice of hearing and seeing,  
 The days of topspin drives and physical well-being

Thank you, my friend shorter by a head, more placid  
 Than me your protegee whose ways are not so lucid,  
 My animal angel sure of touch and humour  
 With face still tanned from some primeval summer

Thanks for your sensual poise, your gay assurance,  
 If ho shating on the lovely uafers of appearance  
 Have held my hand put vetoes upon my reason,  
 Sent me to look for berries in the proper season

Some day you will leave me or at best, less often  
 I shall sense your presence when eyes and nostrils open,  
 Less often find your burgling fingers ready  
 To pick the locks when mine are too unsteady

Thank you for the times of contact for the glamour  
 Of pleasure sold by the clock and under the hammer,  
 Thank you for bidding for me for breaking the corlon  
 Of spies and sentries to mid the unravished garden

And thank you for the abandon of your giving,  
 For seeing in the dark, for making this life worth living

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